

ISSN: 1814-6961 (print)
ISSN: 2788-9718 (online)

Отан тарихы
Отечественная история
History of the Homeland

Үш айда бір рет шығатын ғылыми журнал
2025. № 28 (1)

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Published in the Kazakhstan
Otan tarikhы
Has been issued as a journal since 1998
ISSN: 1814-6961 (Print)
ISSN: 2788-9718 (Online)
2025. Vol. 28. Is. 1. Pp. 272–289
Journal homepage:
<https://otan.history.iie.kz>



FTAXP / МРНТИ / IRSTI 03.20

https://doi.org/10.51943/2788-9718_2025_28_2_272-289

FROM UNCHARTED FRONTIER TO IMPERIAL DOMAIN: RECONNAISSANCE EXPEDITIONS IN THE KAZAKH STEPPE

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Abstract. *Introduction.* In the 19th century, the Kazakh steppe remained a geographically uncharted frontier that challenged the Russian Empire's military and administrative ambitions. Through systematic reconnaissance, Russia transformed this perceived “unknown” landscape into a governable space, integrating geographical, ethnographic, and logistical insights into its imperial strategy. This study explores the dual role of these expeditions in advancing territorial expansion and consolidating authority over the steppe. *Objective and tasks.* The article analyzes the role of military reconnaissance in transforming the steppe from an uncharted frontier into a managed space, demonstrating how these operations supported the implementation of imperial strategies. *Materials and methods.* The study draws on archival materials, including reconnaissance reports and correspondence of military officials. *Discussion.* Military expeditions combined reconnaissance with scientific research, encompassing the geographical and ethnographic study of the region. *Results.* Military expeditions combined reconnaissance with scientific research, facilitating the geographical and ethnographic exploration of the region. These efforts yielded critical data on the terrain, resources, and local populations, forming the foundation for constructing fortifications, establishing routes, and developing logistical networks. Military reconnaissance not only enabled territorial expansion but also provided the groundwork for administrative control and colonial development of the steppe.

Keywords: Kazakh steppe, military reconnaissance, Russian Empire, topographical surveys, administrative control

Acknowledgment. The article was prepared within the framework of the project “Logistics of Imperial Russian military campaigns in Kazakh steppe and Turkestan region: impact and consequences on Kazakh society” (IRN: AP19676769).

For citation: Abdualy A.B., Dzhursunbaev B.A., Tokbolat S.T. From uncharted frontier to imperial domain: reconnaissance expeditions in the Kazakh steppe // Otan tarihy. 2025. Vol. 28. No. 2. Pp. 272–289. [In Eng.]. DOI: 10.51943/2788-9718_2025_28_2_272-289

БЕЙМӘЛІМ АЙМАҚТАН ИМПЕРИЯЛЫҚ ИЕЛІККЕ: ҚАЗАҚ ДАЛАСЫНДАҒЫ БАРЛАУ ЭКСПЕДИЦИЯЛАРЫ

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Аңдатпа. *Kіріспе.* XIX ғасырда Қазақ даласы Ресей империясы үшін географиялық тұрғыдан зерттелмеген аймақ болып, әскери және әкімшілік мақсаттарын жүзеге асыруда елеулі қиындықтар туғызды. Алайда, жүйелі түрде жүргізілген барлау экспедициялары арқылы Ресей бұл «беймәлім» даланы басқаруға қолайлы кеңістікке айналдырып, оның географиясы, этнографиясы және логистикасы туралы маңызды мәліметтерді империялық стратегиясына шебер қолданды. *Мақсаты мен міндеттері.* Мақалада Ресейдің барлау қызметінің қазақ даласын зерттелмеген аймақтан басқарылатын кеңістікке айналдырудағы рөлі талданып, оның империялық стратегияларды жүзеге асыруға тигізген ықпалы жан-жақты көрсетіледі. *Материалдар мен әдістер.* Зерттеудің дереккөзі ретінде мұрағаттық материалдар, соның ішінде барлау экспедицияларының есептері, әскери шенеуніктердің хат алмасулары пайдаланылды. *Нәтижелер.* Әскери экспедициялар барлау міндеттерін ғылыми зерттеулермен үйлестіріп, аймақтың географиялық және этнографиялық тұрғыдан жан-жақты зерттелуін қамтамасыз етті. Бұл экспедициялар жер бедері, табиғи ресурстар және жергілікті халық туралы маңызды деректер жинауға мүмкіндік берді. Осы мәліметтер бекіністер салудың, жол бағыттарын белгілеудің және логистикалық желілерді дамытудың берік негізін қалады. Әскери барлау жұмыстары аймақтық отарлауды ғана емес, сонымен қатар қазақ даласын әкімшілік басқару мен игерудің негізін қалады.

Түйін сөздер: Қазақ даласы, әскери барлау, Ресей империясы, топографиялық зерттеулер, әкімшілік бақылау

Алғыс айту. Мақала «Ресей империясының қазақ даласы мен Түркістан өлкесіне әскери жорықтарының логистикасы: қазақ қоғамына әсері мен салдары» (ЖТН: AP19676769) жобасы аясында дайындалды.

Дәйексөз үшін: Абдуалы А.Б., Жүрсінбаев Б.Ә., Токболат С.Т. Беймәлім аймақтан империялық иелікке: қазақ даласындағы барлау экспедициялары // Отан тарихы. 2025. Т. 28. № 2. 272–289-бб. [Ағыл.]. DOI: 10.51943/2788-9718_2025_28_2_272-289

ОТ НЕИЗВЕДАННЫХ ФРОНТИРОВ ДО ИМПЕРСКИХ ВЛАДЕНИЙ: РЕКОГНОСЦИРОВОЧНЫЕ ЭКСПЕДИЦИИ В КАЗАХСКУЮ СТЕПЬ

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Аннотация. *Введение.* В XIX веке казахская степь оставалась географически неисследованной территорией, которая ставила перед Российской империей сложные военные и административные задачи. Посредством систематической рекогносцировки Россия преобразовала этот воспринимаемый как «неизвестный» ландшафт в управляемое пространство, интегрировав географические, этнографические и логистические данные в свою имперскую стратегию. Данное исследование рассматривает двойную роль этих экспедиций в расширении территориального контроля и укреплении власти над степью. *Цель и задачи.* Статья анализирует роль военной рекогносцировки в преобразовании степи из неисследованной территории в управляемое пространство, демонстрируя, как эти операции поддерживали реализацию имперских стратегий. *Материалы и методы.* Исследование основано на анализе архивных материалов, включая отчёты о рекогносцировке и переписку военных чиновников. *Результаты.* Военные экспедиции сочетали разведывательные задачи с научными исследованиями, включавшими географическое и этнографическое изучение региона. Военные экспедиции обеспечили сбор критически важных данных о местности, природных ресурсах и местном населении, что стало основой для строительства укреплений, прокладки маршрутов и развития логистических сетей. Военная рекогносцировка не только способствовала территориальной экспансии, но и заложила базу для административного управления и колониального освоения степи.

Ключевые слова: Казахская степь, военная рекогносцировка, Российская империя, топографические исследования, административный контроль

Благодарность. Статья подготовлена в рамках проекта «Логистика военных походов Российской империи в казахскую степь и Туркестанский край: влияние и последствия для казахского общества» (ИРН: AP19676769).

Для цитирования: Абдуалы А.Б., Джурсунбаев Б.А., Токболат С.Т. От неизведанных фронтиров до имперских владений: рекогносцировочные экспедиции в казахскую степь // Отан тарихы. 2025. Т. 28. № 2. С. 272–289. [на англ.]. DOI: 10.51943/2788-9718_2025_28_2_272-289

Introduction. Following the dissolution of the Kazakh khanate system and the subsequent imposition of administrative control over the Junior Zhuz in the early 19th century, significant portions of the steppe remained largely uncharted. The most detailed account of the region during this time was provided by A.I. Levshin, whose observations were primarily derived from data collected in Orenburg between 1820 and 1822 [Levshin, 1996]. Levshin's work, which drew heavily from the Orenburg Frontier Commission's archives, provided valuable insights into Kazakh tribal structures, legal systems, and social customs. However, his descriptions of the steppe and the geography were frequently incomplete and, at times, inaccurate. These shortcomings were a consequence of Levshin's reliance on fragmented travel routes, imprecise maps, and oral reports from Kazakh informants, which lacked the precision required for effective military planning [Zemli Kirgiz-Kaisakov..., 1848: 1].

Until 1845, Russia's fortified lines primarily marked the northern edge of the steppe, with little military incursion or fortification extending deeper into the region. It was only with the construction of military outposts that systematic topographical surveys of the steppe began to take shape. As Russia's military presence in the region expanded, reconnaissance expeditions and cartographic surveys became integral to both imperial strategy and scientific inquiry. These expeditions went far beyond the routine geodetic and topographical work conducted in other parts of the empire. The difficult terrain and extreme climatic conditions posed significant challenges to military operations and reconnaissance. Cartographers and military officers found themselves conducting surveys in tandem with military campaigns, navigating a landscape fraught with security risks, language barriers, and unfamiliar environmental factors. This merging of military necessity with scientific exploration marked a distinctive characteristic of Russian efforts in the Kazakh steppe.

The role of military reconnaissance in the Russian Empire's expansion into the Kazakh steppe remains an underexplored aspect of imperial and military historiography. While numerous works have focused on the military strategies and technological advancements employed during Russia's Central Asian campaigns, few have thoroughly examined the contributions of topographical surveys, nor have the activities of cartographers and officers of the General Staff received the attention they warrant. The climate of the steppe – characterized by scorching heat, water scarcity, and vast expanses of barren terrain – exerted a psychological toll on troops, complicating efforts to assess situations effectively. M.I. Venyukov, one of the first intellectual officers involved in Central Asian expeditions, discussed these challenges extensively in his writings on steppe campaigns, providing valuable insights into the organization of expeditions, the selection of equipment, and the adaptation of diets to suit the region's extreme conditions [Venyukov, 1860].

The logistical difficulties inherent in campaigning within the steppe underscored the critical importance of reconnaissance. The absence of established roads, limited access to water and forage, and the vast distances between supply depots rendered traditional European military strategies impractical. Consequently, reconnaissance expeditions became vital not only for mitigating environmental uncertainties but also for gathering intelligence on enemy movements, identifying viable routes, and locating resources. These missions, while often viewed as preparatory, were in fact integral to shaping the strategic framework within which military campaigns were conceived and executed.

Despite the substantial role that reconnaissance expeditions played, they have often been relegated to the margins of historical inquiry. Traditional historiography has tended to focus on the tactical and technological aspects of Russia's imperial military campaigns, overlooking the epistemic dimensions of the empire's expansion into the steppe. Reconnaissance expeditions are often treated merely as logistical preparations, with little consideration given to the broader role they played in generating the spatial, cultural, and strategic knowledge essential for the empire's dominance in the region. By framing the steppe in terms that aligned with imperial priorities, reconnaissance efforts became central to the Russian Empire's ability to map, navigate, and control this vast and challenging frontier.

This article argues that military reconnaissance expeditions in the Kazakh steppe were not simply tactical instruments but embodied an epistemic practice that facilitated the Russian Empire's ability to dominate the region. These expeditions were integral in transforming the steppe from an unknowable and hostile frontier into a manageable and governable space. By synthesizing ethnographic, geographical, and logistical knowledge, Russian reconnaissance operations provided the foundation upon which imperial control was built. This paper will examine the methodologies, objectives, and outcomes of these reconnaissance efforts, shedding light on their significance within the broader context of Russian imperialism in Central Asia.

Materials and Methods. This study examines the role of reconnaissance in the Russian military campaigns in Central Asia during the 19th century through a comprehensive analysis of archival materials and primary sources. The research employs a multi-pronged methodological approach, integrating archival research, textual analysis, and qualitative contextual evaluation to explore the strategic, logistical, and epistemic dimensions of reconnaissance operations.

Archival materials form the cornerstone of this study, with extensive investigations conducted in repositories across Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. These archives were selected for their relevance to the study's focus on military reconnaissance and its implications for imperial expansion. In Russia, the archives of the Imperial War Ministry and the Orenburg Governorate General provided key materials. These records include strategic planning documents, such as communications between senior military officials and the tsarist government, offering insights into the formulation of reconnaissance strategies. Expedition reports were also pivotal, offering detailed accounts of missions, maps, topographical descriptions, and evaluations of the steppe's terrain and resources. Additionally, logistical records highlighted supply chains, troop provisioning, and the integration of local resources to sustain military campaigns.

The Central State Archives of the Republic of Kazakhstan offered critical perspectives from the Kazakh side. Administrative records provided insights into local governance, the role of intermediaries, and the incorporation of Kazakh scouts into Russian military operations. Ethnographic and cultural data further illuminated Kazakh social structures and their interactions with Russian military authorities, enriching the understanding of the human dimensions of reconnaissance activities. Similarly, archival materials in Uzbekistan, particularly those related to the Khoqand khanate, contextualized the regional dynamics that shaped Russian military operations, including alliances, rivalries, and resistance movements.

Primary sources complemented archival research by offering contemporaneous perspectives on reconnaissance activities. These sources include military treatises and articles published in 19th-century Russian journals, which provide theoretical frameworks for understanding reconnaissance and steppe warfare. These writings delve into tactical considerations and reflect on the challenges posed by the region's unique environment. Memoirs and correspondence from participants, including officers and topographers, further contribute firsthand insights into the operational realities of reconnaissance missions. Notable examples include the writings of M.I. Venyukov, whose reflections capture the psychological and physical toll of steppe campaigns.

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative methods, with an emphasis on contextual and thematic patterns. The analysis focused on three key areas. First, reconnaissance expeditions were examined to understand their objectives, methodologies, and outputs, such as maps and reports, and their role in transforming the Kazakh steppe into a governable space. Second, the study analyzed logistical networks, exploring the integration of local resources, supply chains, and the adaptation of military strategies to the challenges of the steppe's vast and inhospitable terrain. Finally, the study investigated the epistemic dimensions of reconnaissance, revealing how these operations generated knowledge that extended beyond immediate military objectives to inform broader imperial policies and strategies. By synthesizing archival and primary source materials within a structured analytical framework, this study seeks to illuminate the critical yet underexplored role of reconnaissance in the Russian Empire's efforts to navigate, control, and incorporate the Kazakh steppe into its domain.

Discussion. The logistical challenges of campaigning in the Kazakh steppe underscored the critical role of reconnaissance expeditions, transforming them from tactical tools into a cornerstone of imperial military strategy. The absence of established roads, scarce water and forage supplies, and vast, unmapped terrains necessitated precise, actionable intelligence for the execution of campaigns. These expeditions not only mitigated the operational uncertainties inherent to steppe warfare but also enabled the Russian Empire to establish spatial and administrative control over a previously nebulous frontier.

Given these challenges, early narratives of Russian military campaigns, primarily authored by 19th-century Russian military writers, offer essential insights into the operational dynamics of steppe warfare. Among the most influential accounts is General A.I. Maksheev's study of the steppe campaigns, which provides a detailed exploration of the strategic motivations, logistical hurdles, and military tactics employed during these expeditions [Maksheev, 1856]. His work highlights the interplay between strategy and environment, emphasizing the reliance on reconnaissance to secure navigable routes and local resources. Maksheev's observations remain valuable for understanding the necessity of reconnaissance in ensuring successful military operations in the vast and harsh steppe environment.

Complementing Maksheev's analysis, the posthumous memoirs of colonel I.F. Blaramberg, a topographer in the Russian General Staff, shed light on the cartographic efforts that underpinned Russian military operations in the region [Blaramberg, 1978]. As the chief topographer of the General Staff, I.F. Blaramberg meticulously documented the methodologies and challenges associated with mapping the Kazakh steppe. His accounts illustrate how reconnaissance expeditions not only identified strategic locations but also contributed to an emerging imperial geography. His detailed observations on terrain, climate, and local resources reinforce the argument that intelligence-gathering was integral to Russia's military success. In a similar vein, M.I. Venyukov's works expand on the strategic implications of reconnaissance, offering recommendations tailored to the unique demands of steppe warfare [Venyukov, 1860]. He advocates for the use of mobile garrisons and the integration of Kazakh scouts into reconnaissance efforts, reflecting a broader evolution in Russian military strategy. Taken together, these sources illustrate how reconnaissance evolved from a reactive necessity to a fundamental element of Russia's imperial expansion.

Despite its significance, the role of military reconnaissance in Central Asia remained largely overlooked in Soviet historiography until the 1990s. It was only in the post-Soviet period that scholars began to examine its function within Russian imperial strategies. However, much of this research remained focused on the late 19th century, leaving earlier campaigns particularly those of the mid-19th century relatively underexplored. One of the few comprehensive studies on Russian foreign intelligence, authored by M. Alekseev, briefly addresses reconnaissance but primarily concentrates on European and Far Eastern contexts [Alekseev, 1998]. His work provides an in-depth analysis of intelligence operations, highlighting the use of covert methods and information gathering through diplomatic and consular networks. Alekseev underscores the improvised nature of many reconnaissance missions during this period, noting that they often relied on informal networks of scouts, traders, and local informants rather than on a structured intelligence framework.

Building on this, O.A. Gokov offers a more focused examination of military reconnaissance in Central Asia. He identifies a significant shift in Russian intelligence operations following the Crimean War (1853–1856), arguing that this conflict underscored the necessity of more systematic and structured intelligence gathering [Gokov, 2011]. He further suggests that during the 1850s and 1860s, Russian military officers often conducted reconnaissance missions under the guise of diplomatic or scientific expeditions, reflecting a growing sophistication in intelligence operations.

Expanding the discussion beyond purely military concerns, K. Ivanov critiques the perception of cartography as a neutral tool, arguing that Russian maps actively constructed imperial ideologies by depicting the steppe as a cultural vacuum primed for annexation [Ivanov, 2020a; Ivanov, 2020b]. His analysis highlights how topographic surveys not only delineated frontiers but also embedded political control into the landscape. By situating mapmaking within a broader framework of imperial power, Ivanov demonstrates how geographic knowledge served both military and political objectives.

Similarly, I.S. Zonn situates Russian reconnaissance expeditions within the geopolitical rivalry of the "Great Game," emphasizing the role of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society in both scientific and military reconnaissance [Zonn, 2022]. His work underscores how intelligence gathering was not merely a practical necessity but also a means of advancing Russia's geopolitical ambitions. Together, these perspectives highlight the multifaceted nature of reconnaissance in Central Asia, revealing its deep entanglement with military strategy, imperial governance, and geopolitical competition.

Recent English-language scholarship, particularly A. Morrison offers a fresh analysis of the logistical and reconnaissance aspects of Russian imperial campaigns in Central Asia. Morrison's work provides a comprehensive study of how Russian forces adapted to the environmental and logistical challenges of the steppe, including the vital role of reconnaissance expeditions in shaping the success of military expeditions [Morrison, 2020].

The existing literature underscores the multifaceted nature of reconnaissance and logistics in Russian imperial campaigns, highlighting their dual role as instruments of both tactical success and epistemic control. Thus, despite the significant volume of work on Russian military expeditions, the study of military reconnaissance in the Kazakh steppe during the 19th century remains insufficiently explored and remains on the periphery of both the military expeditions themselves and scholarly attention.

Results. The formal incorporation of the Junior Zhuz of the Kazakhs into the Russian Empire occurred in 1731, when Empress Anna Ioannovna signed the "Charter of Allegiance," granting Russian protection to Khan Abulkhair [Kraft, 1898: 3]. However, this political agreement did not immediately translate into systematic efforts to document the Kazakh steppe a vast and arid expanse stretching across Central Asia.

Russian settlements remained confined to the northern frontier, restricted by the availability of arable land near the Ural River in the northwest and the Semirechye region in the northeast.

The empire's incomplete understanding of the Kazakh steppe underscored the need for systematic missions to gather reliable information about its geography, travel routes, and population. Reconnaissance expeditions emerged as the primary solution, combining military objectives with the generation of geographic and ethnographic knowledge. The resulting maps and documentation not only enhanced the efficiency of military campaigns but also informed the Russian Empire's administrative strategies, enabling deeper integration of the steppe into the imperial framework.

The mapping of the Kazakh steppe in the 19th century illustrates the intersection of military strategy and knowledge production in Russian imperial policy. Reconnaissance missions, initially driven by practical necessity, laid the foundation for broader scientific and administrative engagement with Central Asia. This dual role of exploration and governance underscores the role of knowledge in the expansion and consolidation of imperial power.

In this context, military reconnaissance missions became indispensable for the Russian administration, serving both as a tool for consolidating control over the steppe and as a means of facilitating military advancement deeper into the region. These missions were tasked not only with gathering geographic and ethnographic data but also with laying the groundwork for subsequent campaigns. A critical aspect of this reconnaissance effort involved the surveying and mapping of specific areas, a task primarily undertaken by officers and enlisted personnel from the Corps of Military Topographers. These specialists were trained to carry out detailed topographical work, ensuring the accuracy of maps and surveys critical to military planning [Zybin, 1897: 183].

In addition to the Corps of Military Topographers, officers from the General Staff played a central role in reconnaissance operations. These officers, often trained as geodetic specialists at the Academy of the General Staff, were responsible for overseeing topographical surveys and ensuring the precision of cartographic outputs. Their expertise extended beyond technical mapping, as they also coordinated reconnaissance activities across various military units operating under regional military-administrative authorities [Gokov, 2011: 57].

Collaboration between General Staff officers and other military personnel enabled a comprehensive approach to reconnaissance. These officers facilitated the participation of diverse units, pooling expertise and resources to enhance the effectiveness of their missions. Upon the completion of their assignments, they produced detailed military-geographical and topographical sketches, which provided critical intelligence for the empire's strategic planning. These reports included essential details such as optimal routes for troop movements, terrain characteristics, the attitudes and disposition of the local population, sources of water necessary for advancing forces, and the availability of food and fodder supplies. This information allowed the Russian administration to make well-informed decisions regarding geographical, political, and military objectives. Moreover, the data gathered through reconnaissance operations contributed to broader imperial goals by shaping policies and strategic planning at the highest levels of governance [Gokov, 2011: 58].

Reconnaissance efforts in the Kazakh steppe during the 19th century were primarily directed by the military governorates of Orenburg and Siberia. These efforts involved gubernatorial offices, frontier commissions, and regional military units, operating under conditions of instability and danger inherent to the region. The precarious environment placed significant administrative and strategic responsibilities on the military governors, who were tasked with overseeing reconnaissance and counter-reconnaissance operations, customs regulation, and conflict resolution through diplomatic and military means. Given the vastness, remoteness, and geopolitical significance of the territories under their jurisdiction, military governors organized extensive exploration and reconnaissance operations. These operations were critical for maintaining imperial control and addressing the challenges of frontier security. To enable these activities, governors were vested with wide-ranging powers, granting them considerable autonomy and authority over all military forces in their respective regions [Sapunov, 2004: 115].

Despite their expansive authority, the administrative structures of the military governors lacked specialized bodies for the systematic collection, analysis, and synthesis of reconnaissance data. As a result, these tasks were delegated to three key institutions under the governors' oversight: The Frontier Commission (affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the Headquarters of the Private Corps (under the Ministry of Military Affairs), and the Customs District (reporting to the Ministry of Finance). Each of these institutions played a distinct role in obtaining and verifying political, economic, and military data while coordinating their efforts to ensure the effectiveness of intelligence-gathering operations. Based on the data collected by

these institutions, military governors made critical decisions and submitted detailed reports to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of War. Among the three institutions, the Frontier Commission held a particularly role due to its responsibility for managing foreign political affairs. This function was amplified during the Napoleonic Wars, prompting the establishment of the “Expedition of Secret Affairs under the Ministry of Defense” in 1810 by General M.B. Barclay de Tolly, the Russian Empire’s Minister of War, with the approval of Emperor Alexander I. This agency, later renamed the Special Chancellery, was tasked with overseeing strategic and operational-tactical reconnaissance [Ocherki istorii..., 2003: 111].

In 1815, the Special Chancellery was dissolved, and its functions were transferred to the First Department of the Quartermaster General's Office of the General Staff. While this department did not directly engage in reconnaissance activities, it processed information provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and incorporated its officers into military-reconnaissance expeditions abroad [Alekseev, 1998: 39]. Consequently, the Frontier Commission, under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, assumed primary responsibility for collecting and managing reconnaissance data. The commission’s First Desk of the Executive Department handled vital political matters, systematically gathering and analyzing information on the Kazakh steppe and the Central Asian khanates. This information was critical for addressing pressing issues and formulating imperial policies.

The General Frontier Commission, a subdivision of the Asiatic Department within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, operated directly under the military governor. Its leadership comprised military officials or oriental scholars, appointed based on the governor's recommendations and with imperial approval. Other members of the commission, including advisers, secretaries, and translators, were selected by the governor upon the chairman's recommendation. Additionally, the commission included 3-5 prominent Kazakhs from the local aristocracy, whose involvement facilitated communication and provided invaluable insights into local conditions.

Employees of the Frontier Commission were required to demonstrate exceptional operational thinking, an ability to grasp the complexities of ongoing activities, and high intellectual capacity. The Commission, in collaboration with the Department of the General Staff of the Separate Corps, was instrumental in coordinating military reconnaissance. This involved gathering intelligence on the influence of neighboring states on the Kazakh steppe, power dynamics among local tribes, the relations between inhabitants and their rulers, and logistical details, including terrain features, and the availability of water, fuel, and fodder [Sapunov, 2004: 116].

Military-reconnaissance expeditions were divided into small and large detachments based on their objectives. Small groups concentrated on topographic surveys, while larger detachments undertook comprehensive military-tactical tasks, including the suppression of significant rebellion centers, the destruction of fortifications belonging to neighboring khanates, and the execution of reconnaissance missions within the Kazakh steppe. Beginning in the 1820s, the Russian Empire intensified its efforts to consolidate control over the Kazakh steppe through systematic deployments of small-scale military reconnaissance detachments. These military-topographical expeditions formed a cornerstone of the Empire's imperial strategy, serving to produce detailed maps and surveys that would facilitate future military operations. Extensive logistical preparations preceded each mission, including the acquisition of horses and camels from local Kazakh communities for transporting supplies and the construction of boats for navigating rivers and lakes. These expeditions were multidisciplinary endeavors, involving not only military personnel but also writers, artists, geologists, botanists, translators, and Kazakh guides, whose expertise was crucial for documenting and traversing the region [Galiev, 1994: 37].

The success of these expeditions depended significantly on the selection of experienced officers. For instance, in 1821, military engineers Artyukhov and Tafaev led a reconnaissance mission with 235 troops and two cannons to survey the area between the Or, Kara Turgai, and Tobol rivers [Maksheev, 1890: 112]. These early expeditions established a foundation for more complex missions in the following years. In 1824, a reconnaissance group led by colonels Tsiolkovsky and Anisimov conducted a survey of the Mugodzhar mountains, the Big and Little Borsyk sands, and the Ilek and Emba rivers. Their route took them through the Karakum Desert and the Syrdarya and Kuandarya banks before returning to Orenburg. Alongside topographical mapping, the group gathered significant ethnographic data, detailing Kazakh clan structures, leadership, weaponry, clothing, and cultural practices [Obzor russkikh putestestviy..., 1955: 38]. These insights underscored the dual purpose of such expeditions: to assess the physical landscape and to understand the socio-political situation of the Kazakh steppe.

At the same time, the Russian Empire expanded its reconnaissance efforts into the Semirechie region to assert influence over the Senior Zhuz Kazakhs, who remained under substantial Qing influence. Responding to a pledge of allegiance from Sultan Suyik Abylaikhanov of the Senior Zhuz, lieutenant colonel Shubin was dispatched on December 24, 1824, with 120 Cossacks and two cannons. This mission aimed to consolidate Russian authority, gather intelligence, and evaluate the political situation [TsGA RK. F. 338. Op. 1. D. 445. L. 3]. By May 1825, Shubin had received further directives emphasizing three objectives: protecting Kazakhs loyal to Russia from incursions by rival Kazakh clans, monitoring inter-clan relations to assess political inclinations toward regional powers such as Russia and Qing, and addressing disputes over property restitution among local Kazakh leaders [GAOO. F. 366. Op. 1. D. 103. L. 5].

Shubin's intelligence-gathering efforts exposed significant divisions within the Senior Zhuz, particularly the fragile authority of Sultan Suyik Abylaikhanov, whose leadership faced resistance from influential tribes such as the Jalayyr and Shapyrashty. In contrast, sultan Abylay and sultan Galiya wielded substantial power, each commanding over 50 auls and jointly mobilizing a formidable force of 60,000 horsemen. Sultan Abylay's strong connections with the Qing government positioned him as a key intermediary, while sultan Galiya maintained a cautious approach, navigating Qing influence while prioritizing local alliances [GAOO. F. 366. Op. 1. D. 120. L. 4-7]. Shubin's October 1825 report cataloged prominent leaders within the Senior Zhuz and their shifting allegiances, providing Russian policymakers with a critical resource. The report emphasized the tribal rivalries and trade disputes that hindered deeper Russian influence in the steppe. Furthermore, Shubin's assessment of caravan routes through the Semirechie region identified pathways to Kashmir and other Asian markets as strategic economic and logistical assets, underscoring their importance for expanding Russian trade networks [GAOO. F. 3. Op. 1, D. 419. L. 27-28]. However, Shubin's activities provoked strong objections from the Qing government, which demanded the withdrawal of Russian forces from the Semirechie. Concerned about the risk of conflict with China, the Russian government acquiesced. By 1826, Shubin and his contingent were recalled from Karatal, marking a temporary setback in Russia's attempts to expand its influence in this contested frontier [Rumyantsev, 1911: 633].

In 1822, F.F. von Berg was entrusted with a critical mission to address challenges in the poorly explored Trans-Caspian region. At the time, the Kazakh steppe was plagued by Kazakh rebel tribes that disrupted Russian trade routes with Asia, nearly severing caravan connections to the East. Berg was tasked with gathering comprehensive intelligence on the region and restoring order. By 1823, as a colonel, von Berg led an extensive expedition to map the Kazakh steppe and evaluate its political conditions. Appointed by prince Volkonsky and supported by the governor of Orenburg and the Asiatic Committee, the mission was allocated a budget of 26,630 rubles [RGIA. F. 1291. Op. 81. D. 91. L. 36-37]. The expedition was divided into three detachments, each assigned to survey distinct areas. Von Berg's unit mapped the terrain between the Ural, Or, and Emba rivers. Colonel Miloradovich focused on the Shingyrlau and Kobda rivers, while colonel Tsiolkovsky surveyed the Zhem river, suppressing Kazakh groups that interfered with operations.

Building on earlier reconnaissance missions, Russian efforts to consolidate control over the Kazakh steppe escalated in the 1840s, with colonel I.F. Blaramberg playing a critical role in advancing imperial objectives. In January 1841, he was appointed commander of the convoys for the diplomatic missions of Butenev to Bukhara and Nikiforov to Khiva. Blaramberg's contingent was tasked with safeguarding envoys and conducting reconnaissance between the Syrdarya and Amudarya rivers. This operation became a cornerstone of Russia's strategic expansion in Central Asia [TsGA RK. F. 4. Op. 1. D. 2413. L. 2, 4, 15, 19]. The expedition comprised 400 Cossacks, 160 infantries, and four cannons, supported logistically by 1,000 camels carrying essential supplies. On May 18, 1841, the contingent departed from Orenburg, advancing five miles before setting up camp. Scouts maintained security as the expedition navigated deeper into Kazakh steppe, facing resistance while systematically documenting the region. Blaramberg's topographers surveyed landmarks and mapped the terrain, providing critical intelligence for subsequent military and administrative initiatives [Blaramberg, 1978: 224].

Despite resistance in the Kazakh steppe, the expedition made significant progress. While the reconnaissance missions gathered crucial topographical data, diplomatic efforts proceeded simultaneously. By June 9, the expedition had traversed the Or and Irgiz rivers, the Mugodzhar mountains, and the Tikbutak river, extending their surveys to the Borsyk Sands and the northeastern shores of the Aral sea. These efforts culminated in the creation of a comprehensive topographical map, which reinforced Russia's strategic presence along the Syrdarya river and laid a foundation for future campaigns [Blaramberg, 1978: 233].

By the mid-1840s, Russia's interest in the geography of Central Asia intensified, driven by changes in its military doctrine for securing the empire's southern frontiers. In the summer of 1845, Emperor Nicholas I ordered the construction of two fortresses deep in the Kazakh steppe – one on the lower Irgiz river, named the Ural Fortress, and another on the middle Turgai river, the Orenburg Fortress. These fortifications were ostensibly justified by the need to counter the insurgency led by Kenesary Kasymuly, whose raids on Russian supply lines had exposed vulnerabilities in the empire's frontier defenses.

This new phase of territorial expansion relied heavily on detailed topographical surveys, which were conducted under the direction of I.F. Blaramberg. As a pioneer in mapping the steppe, I.F. Blaramberg initiated expeditions in 1843, deploying two teams, each consisting of an officer and four surveyors. Protected by a contingent of 100 Cossacks and supplied with camels, wagons, and yurts, these teams systematically expanded the mapped regions along the imperial frontier. Their initial method of gradual, layered mapping was disrupted in 1845 when the imperial directive to construct the Ural and Orenburg fortresses pushed surveyors deeper into the steppe, creating “wedge-shaped” incursions into previously uncharted territories [TsGA RK. F. 4. Op. 1. D. 3393, Pp. 1-14].

In 1846, the Russian Empire launched a series of strategic reconnaissance missions to collect topographical data on the Syrdarya basin and the Aral Sea as part of its broader effort to expand influence over the Central Asian khanates. This initiative was led by the General Staff, which assigned astronomer B. Lemm to Orenburg to establish geodetic reference points for conducting topographical surveys across the Kazakh steppe. Recognizing the strategic significance of this effort, Orenburg governor-general V.A. Obruchev assigned captain Shultz to accompany B. Lemm with an additional directive: to assess the feasibility of exploiting the lower Syrdarya for military and economic purposes. During their expedition, Shultz misinterpreted the dense reed growth along the Syrdarya near the Raim fort, approximately 60 *versts* (verst – an old Russian unit of length, approximately 1.1 km.) from the river's mouth, as grass suitable for hay. He reported that the area could yield up to a million puds of fragrant hay, a claim that greatly encouraged V.A. Obruchev [Maksheev, 1890: 127]. Citing this finding, V.A. Obruchev proposed the establishment of a new fortress, arguing that it would solidify Russian control over the lower Syrdarya and preempt any potential British encroachment in the region – a pressing concern of the time. Despite initial resistance from St. Petersburg, V.A. Obruchev's insistence eventually secured approval for the plan. In January 1847, V.A. Obruchev prepared for the construction of Fort Raim. He assembled a military contingent, supplies, and equipment sufficient to sustain a garrison for a year. Upon arriving at the site, the earlier error in Shultz's report became apparent the supposed hay-rich fields were, in fact, dense reed beds unsuitable for agriculture. However, V.A. Obruchev pressed forward with the construction, as abandoning the project would have wasted the considerable resources and bureaucratic effort already expended [OGA00. F. 6. Op. 10. D. 6024. Pp. 2].

The strategic importance of Fort Raim went beyond its immediate location. By extending Russian influence to the lower Syrdarya, the fort brought approximately 6,000 Kazakhs under imperial control and created a defensive outpost against the khanates of Khoqand and Khiva. [OGA00. F. 6. Op. 10. D. 5873. P. 4]. Construction of the Fort Raim was completed in 1847, and its establishment was swiftly followed by a display of Russian naval power. On July 11, 1847, the vessels “*Nikolay*” and “*Constantin*” were launched into the Aral Sea. By 1848, V.A. Obruchev advocated for the construction of additional ships, including a steam barque designed for navigation on the Syrdarya river. This initiative facilitated captain A.I. Butakov's exploration of the Aral Sea during the summer and autumn of 1849. His surveys documented key geographical features, including the Kosaral, Kokaral, and Barsakelmes islands, the Kulandy Peninsula, the Ustyurt Plateau, and the Syrdarya's delta. Alongside topographical mapping, he identified two new islands, Nikolay and Tsar's islands on the map [OGA00. F. 6. Op. 1. D. 5960. Pp. 9-10].

In 1851, following his reappointment as Orenburg governor-general, V.A. Perovsky devised a plan to capture Khoqand fortresses along the Syrdarya, with a particular focus on Ak-Mechet. This initiative aligned with Emperor Nicholas I's 1852 proposal to connect the Siberian line with the Syrdarya fortifications. The previous year, adjutant general N.N. Annenkov had outlined a comprehensive strategy in his “*Survey of the Kazakh Steppe*”, advocating for the restoration of outposts between Ayagoz and Akmola, which had been abandoned in 1838 after raids by Kazakh Sultan Kenesary Kasymuly. Annenkov's proposal aimed to extend Russia's defensive perimeter by securing its left flank along the Ili and Chu rivers and its right flank on the Syrdarya. As anticipated, the Russian emperor approved the plan and solicited input from the Orenburg and West Siberian governors-general [Terentyev, 1906: 203].

Simultaneously, escalating civil unrest in the Khoqand khanate and deepening conflicts among the Qipchak elite created an opportune moment to implement the connection of the lines, as these internal struggles diverted the khanate's focus from frontier defense [Tokbolat, Dzhursunbaev, 2025]. Aware of Ak-Mechet's strategic significance in regional politics and trade, V.A. Perovskii declared: "The Syrdarya river and the Ak-Mechet fortress will undoubtedly become the primary pillars of political and trade relations with Central Asia" [TsGA RUz. F. 715. Op. 1. D. 14. P. 194]. Soon, after securing imperial approval, V.A. Perovskii dispatched ensign Golov with a reconnaissance unit of four topographers and 80 Cossacks to survey the route from the Fort Aral (formerly Fort Raim, renamed in 1851) to Ak-Mechet. Although Golov's detachment successfully mapped the right bank of the Syrdarya, their advance was halted by the threat of Khoqandi forces, who warned of military retaliation if they proceeded further. As a result, the topographers were forced to retreat to Fort Aral [RGVIA. F. 1441 Op. 1. D. 54. P. 29-30].

The failed reconnaissance prompted V.A. Perovskii to organize a new expedition without delay. In May 1852, less than a month after Golov's mission, he assigned colonel I.F. Blaramberg, to lead another reconnaissance expedition to Ak-Mechet. The primary objectives were detailed cartographic surveying and preparations for a potential siege. Should conditions allow, Blaramberg was instructed to destroy the Khoqandi fortress, as its presence obstructed St. Petersburg's plan to link the Siberian line with fortifications along the Syrdarya [RGVIA. F. 483, Op. 1, D. 30. Pp. 16-18 ob.].

By June 1852, Blaramberg's detachment, comprising 200 Cossacks, 125 infantrymen, three cannons, and 125 camels, reached Aral Fort. On June 27, they advanced toward the Koskorgan Fortress along the Syrdarya, arriving there on July 5 and establishing a camp near Karakol on July 12. Between July 14 and 17, Golov's detachment joined the operation, conducting a survey of the Karaozek area and the Syrdarya's mouth [Blaramberg, 1978: 304]. According to Blaramberg's memoirs, Taipa Dzhamgurchin, a Kazakh biy of the Zhappas tribe, guided Russian troops toward Ak-Mechet and assisted in crossing the flooded Besaryk River using reed rafts. During this maneuver, Russian forces captured several Khoqand emissaries, including a Bukharian merchant. On July 19, the expedition reached the vicinity of Ak-Mechet and launched an assault the following day. However, due to a lack of siege equipment, the attack was unsuccessful, resulting in 10 fatalities and 40 injuries among Russian forces [Blaramberg, 1978: 306]. Despite these setbacks, Blaramberg managed to destroy several smaller Khoqandi fortifications and produce a detailed map of the region [Terentyev, 1906: 216]. Although the assault on Ak-Mechet failed, Perovskii praised Blaramberg's efforts [TsGA RUz. F. 715. Op. 1. D. 13. P. 235]. Drawing on Blaramberg's reconnaissance data and maps, Perovskii launched a larger-scale military campaign in the spring of 1853, ultimately capturing the fortress [Shemansky, 1861: 10-31].



Fig. 1. Map of colonel I.F. Blaramberg's route from Fort Aral to Ak-Mechet. July 1852. Compiled by captain A.I. Maksheev. [RGVIA. F. 483, Op. 1, D. 30. P. 35].

In July 1853, another key reconnaissance campaign was launched under major M. Peremyshlsky, who led a force of 467 Cossacks, 54 Kazakh guides. The expedition was initiated in response to a request from Kirgiz *manap* (*manap* a figure of authority among the Kyrgyz) Ormon Niyazbekov to swear allegiance to Russia. Its primary objective was to locate a suitable site for a fortress along the Ile river, facilitating the establishment of Russian dominance in the Semirechie region. The survey pinpointed a location near the settlement of the Senior Zhuz Kazakhs, close to Little Almaty, which proved to be both strategically and economically ideal for a new fortress. As a result, in 1854, the Fort Verny was established at this site, solidifying Russian authority in the region [Goryacheva, 1956: 103].

The defeat of the Russian Empire in the Crimean War (1854-1856) prompted a strategic shift in its foreign policy, redirecting attention toward Central Asia. This new focus prioritized the conquest of the Kazakh steppe and the subjugation of regional khanates. In alignment with this agenda, the Asian Committee convened in St. Petersburg on January 24, 1859, to outline the next course of action. As part of these deliberations, governor-general of Western Siberia G. Gasford decided to postpone the destruction of Khoqand fortresses in the Shu region until the summer of 1859 [Khalfin, 1960: 124-125].

In preparation for these operations, intelligence gathering became a key priority. During the spring of 1859, captain M.I. Venyukov was dispatched to Fort Verny with a dual mandate: first, to conduct a detailed reconnaissance of the Khoqandi fortresses of Tokmak and Pishpek, and second, to assess their military strength, fortifications, and supply chains. Additionally, he was tasked with leveraging merchants and spies to obtain official decrees issued by Khoqand's new ruler, Malla khan, concerning military, political, and civil affairs [TsGA RK. F. 3. Op. 1. D. 32. Pp. 4-6].

The reconnaissance mission in the Shu region was carried out with a well-equipped force. Two infantry companies from the 8th Battalion stationed at Fort Verny, along with trained sharpshooters, two sotnyas of Cossacks, and five cannons, were mobilized to support Venyukov's efforts [TsGA RK. F. 3. Op. 1. D. 32. P. 1-2]. Between June and July 1859, his detachment successfully surveyed and mapped the 600-verst route from the Fort Verny to Khoqand-controlled territory. In his detailed report, M.I. Venyukov evaluated the defensive capabilities of Pishpek Fortress and analyzed the composition of the Khoqand military. His findings, corroborated by intelligence from trade caravans and informants, revealed that Pishpek had recently been reinforced with a third defensive wall and stocked with 1,500 quarters of grain for its garrison. Additionally, he reported that Malla khan had issued letters urging local Kazakh tribal leaders, including Ali Adilov and Sypatay Bi, to mobilize resistance against Russian forces [GAOO. F. 366. Op. 1. D. 230. Pp. 44-45].

In response to these developments, Russian authorities took preemptive measures to solidify their control over the steppe frontier. That same year, construction began on Kastek Fortress, strategically positioned to secure a critical route linking the Senior Zhuz Kazakhs with the Shu Kirgiz (*Chuiskie kirgizy*). Beyond its immediate defensive role, Kastek also facilitated reconnaissance missions and reinforced the expanding network of Siberian and Syrdarya fortresses, thereby enabling Russian forces to push deeper into Khoqandi territory. The garrison stationed at Kastek comprised one infantry company, 40 Cossacks, and five cannons [TsGA RK. F. 3. Op. 1. D. 31. P. 8].

By the summer of 1860, Russian military expeditions in Semirechie intensified. Colonel A.E. Zimmerman led a large-scale reconnaissance expedition consisting of 600 Cossacks, six infantry companies (totaling 1,750 men), 15 cannons, eight mortars, and a rocket team. The force was further supported by 200 local Kazakh auxiliaries. As part of this campaign, lieutenant Vrochensky transported two 2-inch rocket launchers and 544 combat rockets from the Life Guards Rocket Facility of the 2nd Artillery Brigade in St. Petersburg [TsGA RK. F. 3. Op. 1. D. 45. P. 1-2, 22-23, 27-30]. The mission aimed to cross the Shu river, gather intelligence, and neutralize the strategically significant Khoqandi fortresses of Tokmak and Pishpek. Tokmak fell on August 26 after a brief assault, while Pishpek, defended by 500 Khoqandi troops, was besieged for five days before its capture and subsequent demolition on September 4 [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1. D. 56. P. 71]. Zimmerman's forces successfully breached Tokmak's clay walls with sustained cannon fire, swiftly securing a decisive victory. In September, he joined forces with the chief of the Alatau Okrug, G.A. Kolpakovsky, and Tezek Nuraliev, senior sultan of the Alban tribe, to orchestrate the destruction of Pishpek following a prolonged siege. This operation not only demonstrated Russian military superiority but also sent a clear message to the Khoqand khanate regarding the consequences of resistance [Abaza, 1902: 63].

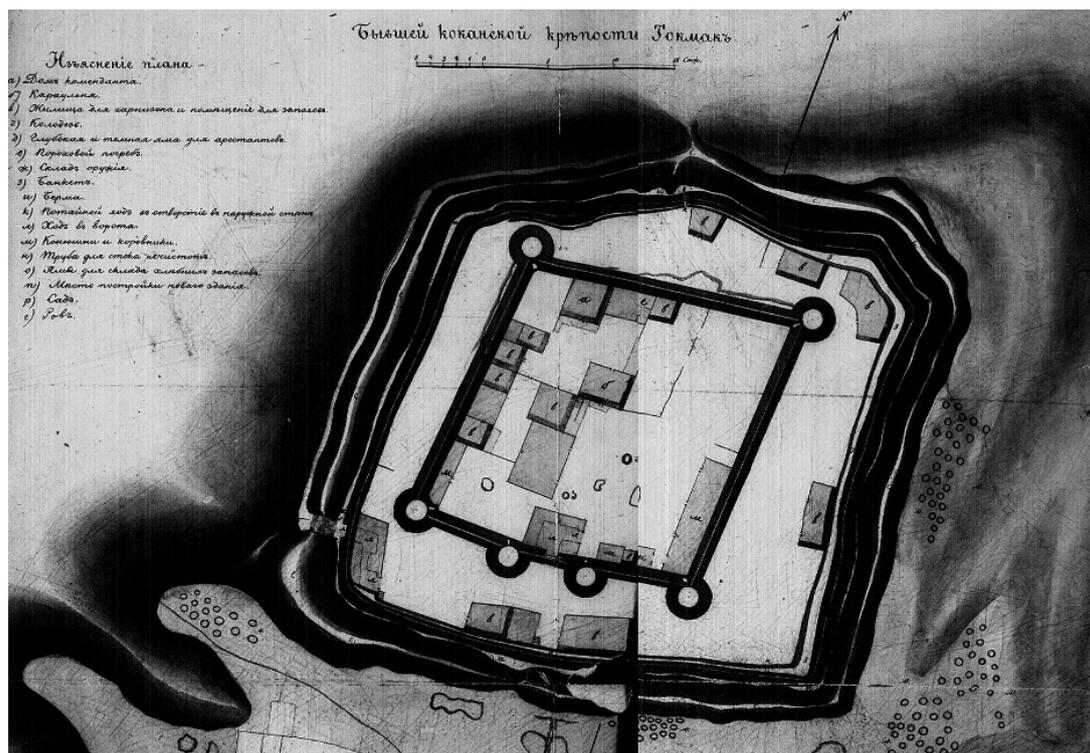


Fig. 2. Plan of Tokmak Fortress. August 1860. Drawn by ensign Strel'nikov of the Corps of Topographers. [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1 D. 56. P. 52].

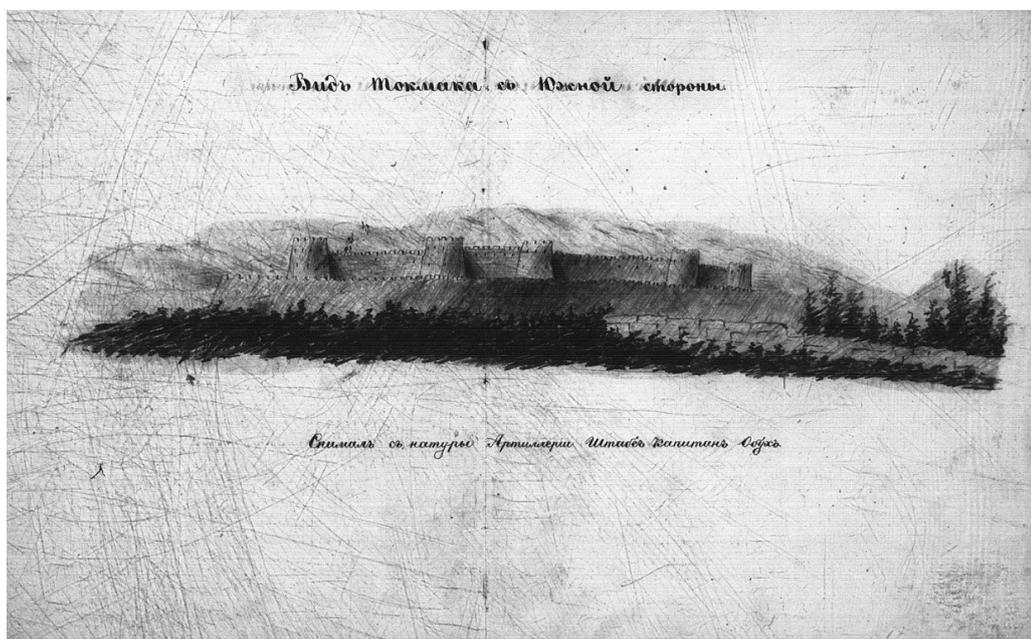


Fig. 3. View of Tokmak Fortress. August 1860. Drawn by Staff captain V. Obukh. [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1 D. 56. Pp. 50].

As Russia consolidated its territorial gains, plans for further expansion were set in motion. On March 3, 1862, a Special Committee assembled to discuss future campaigns, bringing together prominent figures such as Grand Duke A.M. Gorchakov, D.A. Milyutin, M.H. Reitern, A.P. Bezak, E.P. Kovalevsky, and N.P. Ignatiev. Among the proposals considered, A.P. Bezak, the newly appointed governor of Orenburg, advocated for the capture of Tashkent as an important step in linking the Orenburg and Siberian frontiers.

This strategy entailed a major reconnaissance campaign, spearheaded by the Siberian Corps, to secure Pishpek and Aulie-Ata. Consequently, on October 24, 1862, colonel G.A. Kolpakovsky led a contingent of 1,800 troops and 18 cannons, successfully capturing Pishpek [TsGA RK. F. 3. Op. 1. D. 15. Pp. 19-20].

By early 1863, Russian officials had refined their strategy for territorial expansion, prioritizing systematic reconnaissance and intelligence gathering to support further military advances. On January 23, a meeting in St. Petersburg brought together the governors-general of Orenburg, A.P. Bezak, and Western Siberia, A.O. Dugamel, to finalize a comprehensive plan for surveying the borderlands between the Syrdarya and Siberia. Special attention was given to the Shu Valley and the Khoqandi fortress of Aulie-Ata, both considered strategically vital for consolidating Russian influence in Central Asia. In the months that followed, reconnaissance missions were dispatched across the Orenburg and Western Siberian regions to map the terrain, assess defensive positions, and evaluate the feasibility of further expansion.

As part of these broader military and reconnaissance initiatives, lieutenant colonel M.G. Lerkhe and colonel M.G. Chernyaev led separate expeditions with the objective of converging at Aulie-Ata. M.G. Lerkhe advanced from the Trans-Ili region through the Chu Valley, while M.G. Chernyaev set out from the Syrdarya line. His detachment departed from Fort Perovskii, advanced toward Turkestan, and, before reaching the city, crossed the Karatau Mountains to arrive at the Khoqand fortress of Suzak, from where he proceeded to Chulak-Korgan [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1. D. 74. P. 31]. During this reconnaissance mission, Orenburg governor-general A.P. Bezak explicitly ordered Chernyaev to avoid direct military engagements with Khoqandi forces. However, according to Chernyaev's own reports, upon reaching Suzak in May 1863, his detachment encountered rifle fire from the fortress garrison. In response, he ordered an assault, launching a volley of rockets. Following a brief exchange, the 40-man Khoqandi garrison surrendered. After capturing Suzak, Chernyaev conducted a detailed survey of the fortress and drafted a plan of its layout [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1. D. 62. Pp. 183-190]. Simultaneously, additional topographic surveys were conducted to map key strategic routes. A detachment under the command of captain Protsenko explored passageways from the Trans-Ili region to Kashgar, traversing the western side of Issyk-Kul. Advancing as far as the Naryn river, Protsenko's unit also destroyed the Khoqandi fortress Jungal and Kurtka, both of which had been abandoned by their garrisons upon the approach of Russian forces [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1. D. 74. Pp. 31-32].

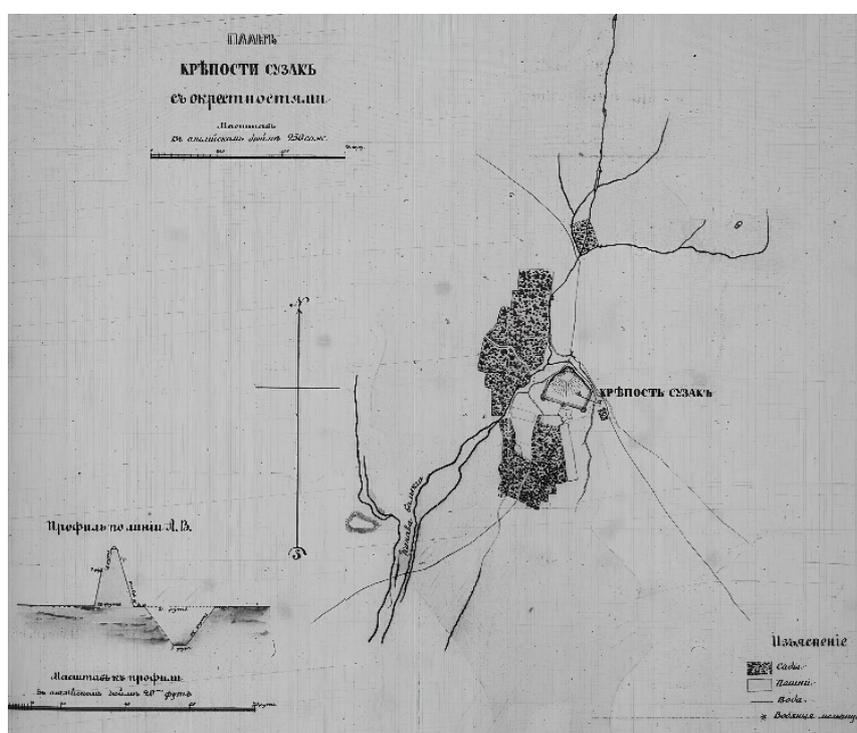


Fig. 4. Plan of the Suzak Fortress and its surroundings. June 1863. [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1. D. 62. P. 190].

Also, extensive topographic surveys of the Irtysh and Syrdarya waterways were conducted to assess their navigability and potential for steamship transport. Particular attention was given to the Upper and Lower Irtysh fairways, as well as the Zaysan lake, which served as a connecting link between these river systems. To this end, a specialized river expedition was organized under the leadership of lieutenant colonel Zryakhov. Departing from Omsk on May 30 aboard the steamship “*Ura*”, the expedition successfully navigated the Irtysh and reached the Manitu-gatul-khan picket on the Kara Irtysh. In August 1863, Zryakhov commenced the return voyage, traversing lake Zaysan and descending the Irtysh while surveying the lower reaches of the Kurchum and Buken rivers. The expedition’s findings included a comprehensive assessment of the Upper and Lower Irtysh fairways, the identification of optimal locations for river piers, and the compilation of a detailed navigational map of the entire route. Simultaneously, a parallel hydrographic expedition was dispatched from the Syrdarya line. Under the command of A.I. Butakov, the steamships “*Aral*” and “*Syrdarya*” ascended the river from the Julek fortress to the Bailydyr-Tugay tract, conducting an extensive survey of the waterway. A.I. Butakov mapped the Syrdarya’s course, producing cartographic materials at a scale of five versts per inch. These maps provided a detailed topographical representation of the surrounding landscape, including the northern slopes of the Karatau mountains and the Syrdarya basin [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1. D. 74. Pp. 4-5].

Despite extensive reconnaissance efforts, unforeseen resistance and logistical challenges hindered certain aspects of the expeditions. Notably, Russian detachments encountered Chinese opposition near the Ili border, compelling some reconnaissance units to retreat. As a result, Lerkhe’s detachment was unable to survey the remaining unexplored terrain between Chulak-Korgan and Aulie-Ata. Nevertheless, the Russian military staff remained confident that previous reconnaissance missions had already addressed most of these gaps. The previous year, captain A.P. Protsenko had conducted an extensive survey of the region, providing data on potential routes and the feasibility of long-term settlement. His reports underscored the agricultural potential of the Chu Valley and the Karatau foothills, highlighting a stark contrast to the arid lower Syrdarya region. While pastoralism remained dominant among local Kazakh communities, evidence of successful grain cultivation suggested that newly established fortifications could sustain themselves using regional resources [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1. D. 74. Pp. 32-33]. Thus, despite the partial gaps in Lerkhe and Chernyaev’s expeditions, Russian officials already possessed substantial knowledge of the terrain, ensuring that future military campaigns could proceed with greater strategic precision.

The government subsequently confirmed the strategic viability of the Pishpek-Aulie-Ata route for transportation, the availability of forage, and the fertility of the Talas Valley based on topographical data gathered during the expedition. Lerkhe identified Merke fortress as a favorable location for a future Russian picket post between Pishpek and Aulie-Ata. Additionally, reports indicated that Aulie-Ata had a population of approximately 1,000 inhabitants, with a garrison force estimated at 500-700 troops. In light of these findings, Russian military staff emphasized the urgent necessity of unifying the Syrdarya and Siberian military lines, arguing that the region’s agricultural productivity could sustain the garrisons of the newly established fortifications using local resources [RGVIA. F. 483. Op. 1. D. 74. Pp. 43-44]. Consequently, Minister of War D.A. Milyutin consolidated these findings into a detailed report for the Special Committee in 1863, recommending the establishment of a strategic line through the Karatau Ridge and the capture of Aulie-Ata by the West Siberian Corps. Tsar Alexander II endorsed D.A. Milyutin’s recommendations on December 20, 1863, setting the stage for the 1864 campaign against the Khoqand khanate.

Conclusion. This article has explored the role of military reconnaissance in the Russian Empire’s expansion into the Kazakh steppe during the 19th century, demonstrating how these efforts extended beyond tactical necessity to become fundamental tools of imperial control and knowledge production. The transformation of the steppe from an enigmatic and inhospitable expanse into a comprehensible and governable space underscores the epistemic dimensions of Russian imperialism, where military operations were inextricably linked to the production of geographical, ethnographic, and logistical knowledge.

Reconnaissance missions, supported by extensive topographical surveys were essential in addressing the unique challenges of campaigning in the steppe, such as extreme climatic conditions, resource scarcity, and logistical complexities. These missions bridged the gap between the empire’s strategic objectives and its understanding of the terrain, enabling the Russian military to map viable routes, secure supply lines, and effectively navigate local sociopolitical dynamics. The involvement of Kazakh intermediaries further highlights the collaborative yet coercive nature of these expeditions, as local knowledge was appropriated to serve imperial aims.

By integrating reconnaissance data into broader administrative and military strategies, the Russian Empire not only secured its frontier but also reinforced its ideological claim over the steppe as a space of order and governance. The construction of fortresses, development of logistical networks, and deployment of advanced cartographic techniques were all underpinned by the intelligence gathered during these expeditions, making reconnaissance a cornerstone of imperial consolidation.

Despite their significance, reconnaissance operations have often been marginalized in historiographical narratives, overshadowed by more visible military campaigns and technological advancements. This study has sought to reframe these operations as central to the empire's ability to assert control over the Kazakh steppe, emphasizing their role in generating a strategic knowledge infrastructure that facilitated Russian dominance in Central Asia.

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- GAOO – Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Omskoy oblasti [State Archive of the Omsk Region]
 OGAOO – Ob'edinenny gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Orenburgskoy oblasti [United State Archive of the Orenburg Region]
 RGIA – Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy istoricheskiy arkhiv [Russian State Historical Archive]
 RGVIA – Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy voenno-istoricheskiy arkhiv [Russian State Military Historical Archive]
 TsGA RK – Tsentral'nyy gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Respubliki Kazakhstan [Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan]
 TsGA RUz – Tsentral'nyy gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Respubliki Uzbekistan [Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan]

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Редакцияның мекен-жайы:

050100, Қазақстан Республикасы, Алматы қ., Шевченко көшесі, 28
Ш.Ш. Уәлиханов атындағы Тарих және этнология институты
«Отан тарихы» журналының редакциясы

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Тел.: +7 (727) 272-46-54.

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Журнал Қазақстан Республикасының Ақпарат және қоғамдық келісім министрлігінде
1998 ж. 9 наурызда тіркеліп, N 158-ж куәлігіне ие болды.

Мақалаларды қайта бастырып жариялағанда, микрофильмге және басқа да көшірмелерге
түсіргенде міндетті түрде журналға сілтеме жасау қажет.