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Defeat in the Field, Victory through Diplomacy: The Russian Khiva Campaign of 1839–1840

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT
This article re-examines the Russian Khiva campaign of 1839–1840 not merely as a failed military expedition but as a product of geopolitical urgency, imperial justification strategies, and institutional limitations shaped by the Great Game. While existing scholarship often explains the campaign through climatic determinism or a romanticized Anglo-Russian rivalry, this study argues that its failure cannot be reduced to environmental factors alone. Drawing on Russian military reports, diaries, Khivan chronicles, British diplomatic correspondence, and Ottoman archival materials, it demonstrates how logistical miscalculations, fragile supply systems, and weak oversight critically undermined the expedition. The article further shows that humanitarian narratives—particularly the liberation of Russian slaves and the protection of trade—functioned as justificatory rhetoric masking broader strategic concerns. Finally, it argues that military failure was subsequently transformed into a tool of diplomatic pressure. By linking decision-making, logistics, and imperial discourse, the study offers a more integrated interpretation of the campaign within nineteenth-century imperial politics.
Keywords: Khiva Khanate, Russian Empire, England, Great Game, Winter Campaign, Logistics, Slavery, and Dominance over the steppes, Diplomacy.

Savaşta Kaybedip Diplomasiyle Kazanmak: Rusların 1839-1840 Hive Seferi

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ÖZ
Bu makale, 1839–1840 Kış Seferi'ni yalnızca başarısız bir askerî girişim olarak değil, Büyük Oyun'un yarattığı jeopolitik rekabetin ve Rus İmparatorluğu'nun meşrulaştırma stratejilerinin şekillendirdiği bir müdahale olarak ele almaktadır. Mevcut literatür seferi çoğunlukla iklim koşulları ya da romantize edilmiş İngiliz-Rus rekabeti üzerinden açıklarken, bu çalışma başarısızlığın çevresel faktörlerle tek başına açıklanamayacağını iddia etmektedir Savaşa katılan Rus askerinin günlükleri, Hive kroniği, İngiliz elçilerinin notlarına dayanan analiz, lojistik yanlış hesaplamalar, ikmal zorlukları ve zayıf denetim mekanizmasının seferi belirleyici biçimde etkilediğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca Rus esirlerin kurtarılması ve ticaret güvenliği gibi gerekçelerin, daha geniş stratejik hedefleri perdeleyen söylemsel araçlar olarak kullanıldığı ileri sürülmektedir. Makale son olarak askerî başarısızlığın diplomatik baskı aracına dönüştürüldüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Böylece karar alma süreçleri, ikmal olanakları ve imparatorluk söylemi arasındaki ilişkiler kapsamlı biçimde ele alınmaktadır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Hive Hanlığı, Rus İmparatorluğu, İngiltere, Büyük Oyun, Kış Seferi, Lojistik, Kölelik, Bozkır Hâkimiyeti, Diplomasi.

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Yapay Zekâ Beyanı*: Herhangi bir yapay zekâ aracı kullanılmamıştır.*

Introduction

During the first half of the 19th century, relations between the Russian Empire and the Khanate of Khiva were primarily shaped by border skirmishes, caravan trade, and the issue of Russian subjects held in bondage. These elements featured prominently in both official Russian correspondence and the discursive frameworks used to legitimize military intervention.[1] However, they alone are insufficient to explain Khiva's strategic significance within Russian imperial policy. St. Petersburg's interest in Khiva formed part of a broader vision, evolving since the early 18th century, that viewed the Caspian-Aral line as a strategic gateway to Turkestan.[2]

In Russian political thought, control over the Caspian basin was never reduced to border security or commercial interests; rather, it carried long-term geopolitical weight, aimed at incorporating the Turkestan khanates into the Russian sphere of influence while preserving the prospect of a route to India.[3] This orientation, already evident in Bekovich-Cherkassky's expedition to the Aral Basin, acquired renewed urgency in the first half of the 19th century within the context of intensifying rivalry with Great Britain. Conceptualized in historiography as the *Great Game*, this competitive environment transformed each move toward Khiva into a strategic necessity.

The Winter Expedition of 1839–1840 represents a critical moment at which this long-term strategic vision was translated into a concrete military endeavor. Although the campaign was presented in official documents through humanitarian justifications—such as ensuring border security and liberating Russian captives—this rhetoric[4] does not fully obscure the underlying geopolitical pressures. Rather, the temporal pressures generated by the Great Game required that the military intervention be articulated in a language more palatable to the public.[5] In particular, the British advance in Afghanistan triggered anxieties over Russian prestige in the region, prompting the use of humanitarian justifications as a diplomatic veneer for what was, in essence, a strategic move.[6]

Beyond geopolitical considerations, the 1839–1840 Winter Expedition has frequently been characterized in historiography as a military failure primarily attributed to the harsh climate of the steppe. Blizzards, extreme cold, and prolonged marches caused severe casualties in the early

[1] D. V. Rodin, "Khivinskiy Pohod V. A. Perovskogo 1839-1840 gg. v Kontekste Anglo-Russkogo Sopernichestva v Sredney Azii," *Jurnal Frontirnykh Issledovaniy* 1 (2022): 43.

[2] V. Bunakov, "K Istorii Snosheniy Rossii s Sredneaziatskimi Khanstvami v XIX. v.," *Sovetskoye Vostokovedeniye* 2 (1941): 7.

[3] D. Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, "Paul's Great Game: Russia's Plan to Invade British India," *Central Asian Survey 33*, no. 2 (2014): 144-145, https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2014.909672; Cem Uncu, "XIX. Yüzyılda İngiliz Dış Politikası Çerçevesinde Güney Türkistan'da Büyük Oyun ve Yankıları" (PhD dess, Necmettin Erbakan University, 2025) 3.

[4] A.V. Kochnev,"Khivinskiy Faktor vo Vneshney Politike Rossiyskoy Imperii XVIII – Pervoy Poloviny XIX vv.," *Uchonyye Zapiski* 2, no. 51 (2017): 26.

[5] S. Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela c 1839-1842," *Russkoe Slovo (Literaturno-Ucenbiy Jurnal*) (1862): 23-24,37.

[6] A. V. Kochnev, "Rossiyskiye Poddannyye v Khivinskom Plenu v Kontse XVIII – Nachale XIX v.: Puti Resheniya Problemy i Posledstviya," *Vestnik Tomskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta* 423 (2017): 103; Uncu, "XIX. Yüzyılda İngiliz", *136.*

phases, anchoring the collapse of the operation in a narrative of climatic disaster.[7] Much of the existing literature has either reinforced this emphasis on environmental determinism or treated the Khiva question within the Great Game as an abstract and somewhat romanticized rivalry.[8] Such approaches remain insufficient to explain, in a comprehensive manner, the relationship between the publicly articulated justifications and the geopolitical pressures shaping the decision-making process, as well as the continuity between military failure and subsequent diplomatic outcomes. Questions such as why the expedition was launched in winter, how logistical and institutional shortcomings in the preparatory phase proved decisive in the field, and how military defeat was later transformed into a tool of diplomatic pressure have often been treated as fragmented and disconnected themes.

The objective of this article is to re-evaluate the 1839–1840 Khiva Winter Expedition not merely as a failed military venture but as a case study of geopolitical haste, discursive legitimation, and institutional capacity shaped by the Great Game. It examines the relationship between the humanitarian framing—centered on border security, trade, and captives—and the temporal pressures exerted by international rivalry on the decision-making apparatus. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the failure cannot be attributed solely to climatic conditions but that weaknesses in logistics, organization, and oversight during the preparatory phase played a decisive role. The article focuses on the planning, execution, and aftermath of the 1839–1840 campaign. Rather than delving into tactical military detail, it emphasizes decision-making processes, logistical preparations, and the diplomatic repercussions of the expedition.

This study makes three fundamental contributions to the literature: First, it moves beyond treating the Great Game as an abstract narrative of rivalry, instead conceptualizing it as a concrete decision-making framework that shaped the timing and risk perception of the campaign. Second, it reinterprets the failure of the expedition by shifting the focus from climate to the systemic institutional and logistical breakdowns present from the outset.Finally, by synthesizing Russian military reports and diaries with Khivan chronicles, British records, and the existing scholarship, the article analyzes the expedition as an international issue involving multiple actors. It argues that the Khiva Expedition should be understood not merely as a military defeat, but as a pivotal moment in which military failure was transformed into diplomatic leverage.

1. Casus Belli and Strategic Motivations

Relations between the Russian Empire and the Khanate of Khiva were initially shaped by border skirmishes, caravan trade, and the issue of Russian subjects held in bondage during the early 17th century. However, the fundamental dynamic defining these bilateral relations extended beyond such immediate concerns; it was deeply rooted in how St. Petersburg positioned Turkestan within the broader framework of global geopolitical rivalry.

From the turn of the 18th century, a long-term strategic vision began to crystallize in Russian imperial thought, aiming to bring the Caspian-Aral line under control. This vision sought not only to incorporate the Central Asian khanates into the Russian sphere of influence but also to

[7] I. M. Belka, "Traktovka Proiskhozhdeniya Khivinskogo Pokhoda 1839–1840 gg. v Istoricheskoy Literature," *Istoriya Orenburgskaya: Nasledie i Sovremennost'* 1 (2006): 58.
[8] Rodin," Khivinskiy Pohod", 46-47.

establish a viable route toward the frontiers of British India.[9] The first tangible manifestation of this imperial design was the expedition dispatched during the reign of Peter the Great, commanded by Prince Bekovich-Cherkassky to explore the Aral Basin.[10] The mission's mandates were ambitious: to bring Khiva into vassalage and to chart the waterways of the Amu Darya leading toward India. The catastrophic failure of the expedition—culminating in the annihilation of Bekovich-Cherkassky and his forces—ensured that Khiva would endure in the Russian state memory as both an unrealized strategic objective and an unsettled historical grievance.[11]

By the end of the 18th century, this historical memory acquired a new dimension by merging with the global rivalry centered on India. Peter's successors, inheriting his vision of forging new routes for eastern trade, sought to establish a permanent foothold in Turkestan in order to challenge British commercial and political dominance over India.[12] In this context, the most striking initiative occurred during the reign of Paul I. In 1801, Paul ordered a force of Don Cossacks to march toward India via Orenburg, along a route in which Khiva and Bukhara stood as indispensable transit points.[13]

By the early 19th century, Russo-French relations entered a period of temporary rapprochement following the Treaty of Tilsit, situating Turkestan within a broader geopolitical framework. London perceived the possibility of Russia directing its attention toward India through Persia and Afghanistan, in collaboration with Napoleon, as a grave threat.[14] This perception linked the defense of India to the policy of establishing a buffer zone across Persia, Afghanistan, and Turkestan, thereby delineating the contours of the Anglo-Russian rivalry later termed the *Great Game* or the *Tournament of Shadows*.[15]

The manifestation of the Anglo-Russian rivalry on the ground became increasingly visible during the first half of the 19th century as Russia intensified its pressure on the Caucasus and Persia. By bringing Persia under its sphere of influence through the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828), Russia secured a significant strategic advantage.[16] These developments turned the prospect of a Russian advance toward the Herat-Kandahar line, and ultimately toward India, into a concrete threat in the eyes of the British bureaucracy.[17]On the Russian side, potential routes to India were reassessed, highlighting two primary corridors: the Persian route and the internal Turkestan route via the Caspian-Khiva-Bukhara line. In this context, Khiva transcended its status as a local power and acquired a distinct strategic value as either an alternative or a

[9] H. S. Edwards, *Russian Projects Against India from the Czar Peter to General Skobeleff*. (London: Remington & Co., 1885), 1–3.

[10] H. Stumm, *Russia in Central Asia: Historical Sketch of Russia's Progress in the East up to 1873 and of the Incidents Which Led to the Campaign Against Khiva*. Translated by J. F. Ozanne and Captain H. Sachs, (London: Harrison and Sons, 1885), 21.

[11] N. I. Veselovskiy, *Ocherk Istoriko-Geograficheskikh Svedeniy o Khivinskom Khanstve*. (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Brat, 1877), 14, 166-168; M. Özkan, "Bekoviç Gibi Kaybetmek: Aleksandr Bekoviç Çarkasskiy'nin 1717 Hive Seferi", *MUTAD* 5, no. 1 (2018): 97-98.

[12] M. Romanovskiy, *The Central Asiatic Question*. (Calcutta: Office of Superintendent of Goverment Printing, 1870), 2.

[13] P. Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia*. (London: Butler& Tanner Ltd., 1990), 28.

[14] Hopkirk, *The Great Game*, 35,59.

[15] A. Morrison, *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia: A Study in Imperial Policy, 1812–1917*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 20-21.

[16] F. Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 5.

[17] B. Prasad, *The Foundations of India's Foreign Policy 1860–1882*. (Delhi: Bookland, 1967), 2.

complement to the Persian route.[18] From the 1830s onward, the center of gravity of the Anglo-Russian rivalry shifted toward Afghanistan, necessitating a re-evaluation of the regional balance of power. The British military intervention in Afghanistan in 1838 clearly signaled to the Russian leadership that the competition had evolved into a global struggle centered on India.[19] Consequently, relations with Khiva were no longer viewed merely through the lens of regional border disputes, but within a much broader strategic framework. In this context, Khiva emerged as a strategic threshold for the security of land connections stretching from the Kazakh steppes and the Amu Darya line toward Afghanistan. The Khiva Campaign of 1839–1840 should therefore be understood not simply as the result of bilateral issues with the Khanate, but as a calculated move to strengthen Russia's position during the Afghan phase of the Great Game.[20]

In the literature produced by Russian researchers during the second half of the 19th century, the Khanate of Khiva was seldom depicted as a component of the Great Game; instead, it was primarily framed through themes such as border security, caravan trade, and slavery. While many studies portrayed the Khiva Expedition as a direct consequence of these chronic problems, they largely overlooked the connection between post-1830 developments and the Anglo-Russian rivalry centered on Afghanistan. This narrative cast the Russian Empire as a victim and the Khanate of Khiva as a perpetrator.

Within this framework, the Russian bureaucracy mobilized issues such as slavery, competition in the Kazakh steppes, and trade disputes as empirical evidence to support the political rationale of the campaign, presenting them as legitimate justifications. The captivity of Russian subjects in the steppe, in particular, provided a powerful moral basis for military intervention. In the official Russian narrative of the 1839–1840 Khiva Expedition, the liberation of Russian slaves remained the most frequently invoked justification. However, the elevation of this issue to the primary objective of the campaign was less a reflection of slavery as a new phenomenon in Turkestan than a reinterpretation of a long-standing condition within a specific historical context—one that had persisted since the 16th century. Early travelogues and embassy reports clearly demonstrate that this was a structural and enduring problem.[21]

By the 1820s, the place of Russian subjects held in Khiva within official discourse had shifted markedly. This change related less to the nature of slavery itself than to its perception by the Russian leadership. The detention of Russian subjects came to be seen as an unacceptable affront that undermined the imperial sovereignty and state prestige.[22] A prominent example of this shift is Muravyov's report, which details the condition of Russian captives and conveys their longing for liberation.[23]

By contrast, the chronicle of the Khivan court historian, Ogohiy, offers a markedly different perspective. In his account, captives and booty appear as routine outcomes of steppe warfare. The

[18] Edwards, *Russian Projects*,31,34.
[19] Furkan Külünk, "19. Yüzyılın İkinci Yarısında İngiltere'nin Afganistan Politikası" (PhD diss., Sakarya University, 2020) 59–61.
[20] *Great Power Rivalry in Central Asia, 1842–1880*. Vol. 1. Edited by Martin Ewans, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 1–9; Prasad, *The Foundations of India's Foreign Policy*, 1–2.
[21] S. V. Jukovekiy, "Snosheniya Rossii s Bukharoy i Khivoy za Poslednee Tridtsatiletie," *Trudy Obshchestva Russkikh Orientalistov* 2 (1915): 16–18.; M.A. M. A. Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody Russkoy Armii*. (Moscow: Veche, 2010), 38.
[22] M. A. Terentyev, *Istoriya Zavoyevaniya Sredney Azii*. Vol. 1. (St. Petersburg: Tipolitografiya, 1906), 107–108.
[23] N. Murav'yov, *Journey to Khiva Through the Turkoman Country*. (London: Oguz Press, 1977), 77.

taking of captives is largely attributed to Turkmen and Kazakh actors, while the Khan is not presented as the direct architect of these processes. In this respect, Ogohiy's account challenges the Russian claim that Khiva had transformed slavery into a centralized state policy.[24]

The prioritization of the slavery question cannot be reduced to mere humanitarian concern; it was strategically emphasized to legitimize the expedition during a period of escalating geopolitical tension. Zakharyina characterized the enslavement of Russian subjects as a profound humiliation to imperial prestige. Sentimentalized accounts of an alleged incident during Perovsky's governorship in Orenburg, involving the captivity of a Russian officer's wife, suggest a deliberate attempt to shape public opinion.[25] In the official Russian narrative, Khiva is cast as the perpetrator, while Russia appears as a morally superior victim. However, slave-taking in the steppe was far from a unilateral process; it constituted a complex trade network involving Turkmens, Kazakhs, and various merchants. An instance documented by Ivanov highlights the complicity of Russian merchants in this system. The case of the merchant Z.V., who facilitated the enslavement and subsequent sale of his own peasants, underscores that slavery functioned as an entrenched economic mechanism rather than a simple external threat.[26] Most tellingly, Mikhail Zaychikov, who was awarded a gold medal for his service in the Perovsky campaign, was later revealed to be a clandestine slave trader who had profited from the sale of his own subjects.[27] Khiva thus functioned primarily as a commercial hub for the sale of captives rather than a raiding center itself. According to the reports of the Persian envoy Mohammad Ghaffur, Allah Quli Khan justified his refusal to return slaves by asserting that they were the property of private individuals beyond his administrative reach.[28] Furthermore, the presence of Russian captives in Bukhara indicates that the decision to launch a military intervention exclusively against Khiva was shaped by strategic considerations extending beyond the plight of the enslaved.

The narrative framework constructed by Russian authors is closely tied to the geopolitical environment shaped by the Afghan crisis. Dost Mohammad Khan's rapprochement with Russia unsettled the British, providing the grounds for the decision to intervene militarily in Afghanistan in 1838. From the Russian perspective, the British presence in Afghanistan raised the prospect of British influence extending toward Turkestan. In this context, Khiva was evaluated not merely as a khanate marked by border disputes but as a critical point of contact within the strategic equation of the Great Game.[29] As documented by Ivanov, Russian intelligence reports also played a significant role in the decision-making phase of the Khiva Expedition. Unverified information suggesting that a British delegation of approximately twenty-five individuals had arrived in Khiva with offers of military support triggered a hurried preparation process among Russian officials. Ivanov identifies the primary objective of the expedition as countering the British expansion in Turkestan at the expense of Russian trade and industry, and restoring Russia's

[24] Muhammad Riza Ogohiy, *Riyozu-d-Davla (Davlat Bog'lari)*. Edited by Abdulla O'rozboyev, (Urganch: Quvonchbek-Mashxura, 2020), 322-323.
[25] I.N. Zakharyina, *Zimniy Pohod v Khivu Perovskogo v 1839 Godu i Pervoe Posolstvo v Hivu v 1842 Godu*. (St. Petersburg: Izdanie P.P. Coykina,1898), 20–22.
[26] N. P. Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya 1839–1840 gg.: Ocherki i Vospominaniya Ochevidtsa*. (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Tovarishchestva Obshchestva "Vennaya Pol'za", 1873), 122.
[27] F. J. Tadjieva, "The Emergence and Specific Aspects of Slavery in Khiva Khanate, Sources of Slavery, Slave Markets, and Their Prices", *Slavery: Theory and Practice* 7, no.1 (2022): 7, DOI: 10.13187/slave.2022.1.3
[28] M. Rezzagi, "Kaçar Devleti Elçilik Raporları Tercüme, Açıklama ve Değerlendirme" (PhD diss, İstanbul University,2023), 73-74.
[29] Hopkirk, *Great Game*, 167-168.

waning influence in the region. Furthermore, he links the goal of liberating not only Russian but also several thousand Persian captives in Khiva to Russia's desire to increase its influence over Persia and to secure moral superiority in the international arena vis-à-visBritain. The intention of Russian officials to conduct the Khiva Expedition simultaneously with the British operation in Afghanistan aligns with this strategic calculus. This synchronicity aimed to limit British diplomatic initiatives intended to halt the expedition.[30]

From the perspective of the Russian Empire, trade was presented alongside slavery as one of the primary justifications for the 1839–1840 Khiva Expedition. In his 1820 report, Muravyov depicted Khiva as a barrier obstructing Russia's economic expansion into Asia.[31] The restrictive practices of the Khanate administration toward Russian merchants, such as imposing exorbitant taxes on non-Muslim traders and forcing caravans into specific routes, led St. Petersburg to perceive Khiva as a center disrupting the flow of commerce.[32] This assessment was articulated more explicitly in the ultimatum dispatched by Perovsky to the Khivan Khan, Allah Quli, in 1836. The document addressed slavery, steppe hegemony, and trade as an interconnected whole. Notably, the claim that Russia did not depend on trade with Khiva, whereas Khiva could not survive without Russian commerce, indicates the weight the trade issue acquired in debates over military intervention.[33] The rhetoric of the ultimatum quickly translated into practice: Khivan merchants along the Orenburg line were effectively detained as hostages, linking the security of trade and the return of slaves to a concrete mechanism of pressure. According to Terentyev, Khivan merchants preparing to depart from Orenburg with a caravan on 28 August were taken into custody; 572 merchants had goods valued at approximately 1,400,000 rubles seized, and their release was made contingent upon the return of Russian captives. This episode demonstrates how trade and slavery were converted into instruments of economic coercion on the ground.[34] However, the assertion that Khiva could not trade without Russia is inconsistent with historical data. According to Blankennagel's findings, Khiva exported goods worth approximately two million annually to Russia, while importing about one million rubles of Russian manufactures.[35] This balance suggests that commercial relations cannot be understood in terms of unilateral dependency. Indeed, Khiva functioned as a vital transit zone rather than merely a commercial hub.

The detention of Khivan merchants also caused significant unrest within Russian commercial circles. For merchants in Orenburg and Astrakhan, the Khiva–Bukhara line represented a stable and essential market. As Terentyev notes, the Russian administration initially approached these arrests with caution, fearing long-term damage to eastern trade. Furthermore, the fact that some Khivan merchants managed to evade capture by posing as Bukharans underscores the flexible nature of Turkestan trade networks, which effectively transcended state borders.[36] Taken together, these observations suggest that the portrayal of Khiva in official Russian narratives as a

[30] Ivanova, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 67-69.

[31] Murav'yov, *Journey to Khiva*, 7-8.

[32] Georg-Ludwig Blankennagel. *Zamechaniya Mayora Blankennagelya Vposledstviye Poyezdki yego iz Orenburga v Khivu v 1793–94 godakh.* Edited by V. V. Grigoryev. (St. Petersburg: Tipografiya Morskogo Ministerstva, 1858), 12.

[33] Kocnev, "Politika Rossii",113-114.

[34] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody*, 44; Y. Kılıçaslan, "Rus Kaynaklarına Göre Hive Hanlığı'nın Rus Çarlığı ile Diplomatik İlişkileri: Başlangıcından 1873'e Kadar," *IJVUST* 7, no. 2 (2025): 141-142.

[35] Blankennagel, *Zamechaniya Mayora*, 18.

[36] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody*, 42–44.

hostile center obstructing trade does not fully reflect reality. Nevertheless, military intervention was legitimized under the guise of securing commerce. This indicates that trade was deliberately reframed as crisis and mobilized in support of a military solution. In this respect, the detention of Khivan merchants further demonstrates that the 1839–1840 expedition was not merely a humanitarian or security-driven initiative; rather, commerce itself was instrumentalized to justify a military framework. Khiva was constructed as an obstacle at the intersection of these multi-layered problems, allowing the expedition to be presented, both to the Russian public and the international arena, as a comprehensive intervention grounded in moral, economic, and strategic justifications.[37]

The issues of slavery and trade tensions between the Khanate of Khiva and the Russian Empire, coupled with the ongoing struggle for hegemony in the Kazakh steppes, were among the principal elements invoked to justify the expedition. The activities of the Khivan and Kokand khanates across the steppe were perceived by the Russian administration as destabilizing factors that hindered the establishment of permanent imperial control. Their influence was assessed within a broader context of political and financial relations with Kazakh sultans.[38] In particular, the contacts between Sultan Kayip and his followers with Khiva facilitated the formation of tax collection and patronage networks operating beyond Russian oversight.[39] Similarly, the fact that Kenesary Kasimov, a grandson of Ablai Khan, fueled resistance in the steppe by establishing ties with both Khiva and Kokand, prevented the Russian administration from treating these relations as mere issues of public order. The escalation of unrest from 1837 onward, together with Kasimov's attacks on Russian outposts and caravans, demonstrated that existing military measures were insufficient to secure lasting control over the steppe. Kenesary's dynastic legitimacy and his influence over Kazakh groups elevated the resistance from a local uprising to a broader political movement.

In the eyes of Russian decision-makers, the presence of Kazakh sultans in contact with Khiva transformed the Khanate into a focal point of regional instability. A concrete example reinforcing this perception was Kenesary's attack on the grain and fodder depots prepared for the 1839–1840 Khiva Expedition, which resulted in significant losses.[40] In Russian military and administrative reports, Khiva emerged as a "rear-guard center" of steppe unrest. It was depicted as a hub of instability, drawing Kazakh groups into its sphere of influence, collecting taxes (*zyakat*) in the steppe, and diverting Russian caravans onto Khivan routes. Within this framework, Khiva was constructed as a geopolitical nexus linked steppe hegemony with the flow of trade.[41]

The 1839–1840 Khiva Expedition should be understood not as a sudden reaction to slavery, trade, or instability in the steppe, but within a broader strategic calculus aimed at consolidating the Russian Empire's position in Turkestan during an intensifying phase of the Great Game. The issues of slavery and trade functioned as catalysts that justified and accelerated this objective, transforming the expedition into a formal institutional decision grounded in diplomatically defensible terms. The Khiva Winter Expedition thus provides a case in which the link between

[37] A. V. Kochnev, "Politika Rossii v Otnoshenii Khivinskogo Khanstva v Nachale XVIII – Vtoroi Polovine XIX v." (PhD diss., Ural Federal University, 2018), 169–171

[38] *A Narrative of the Russian Military Expedition to Khiva Under General Perovskiy in 1839*. Translated from the Russian for the Foreign Department of the Government of India, (Calcutta: Office of Superintendent Government Printing, 1867), 41.

[39] F. Ünal, *Sultan Kenasarı*. (İstanbul: İlgi Kültür Sanat, 2010) 88-91, 132.

[40] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 67–69.

[41] H. Şen, *Muhammed Ali Han Dönemi Hokand Hanlığı*. (İstanbul: Bilgeoğuz, 2024) 169-173.

strategic intent and field execution can be clearly traced, illuminating both the rationale and the modalities of the intervention.

2. Operational Planning and Logistical Mobilization

In the context of the Great Game outlined in the previous section, the prospect of increasing British influence in Turkestan prompted the Russian Empire to consider a military expedition against the Khanate of Khiva. However, the proposal did not initially receive unanimous support within the government. Vice-Chancellor Count Karl Nesselrode and Minister of War Count A. I. Chernyshev openly opposed the plans of V. A. Perovsky, the military governor of Orenburg, arguing that the venture offered limited gains while entailing considerable risks for the empire. In response, Perovsky sought special permission to travel to St. Petersburg to present the necessity of the campaign directly to Emperor Nicholas I. His firm declaration that he would personally assume all responsibility and risk proved decisive in securing the imperial approval.[42] Following this, a Special Committee—composed of Nesselrode, Chernyshev, and Perovsky himself—formalized the decision and the operational plan through a protocol approved on 12 March 1839.[43] To avoid provoking British intervention, the Committee decided to keep the true objective of the expedition confidential, conducting the operations under the guise of a scientific survey of the Aral Sea that had originally been planned and postponed in 1837. The expedition was thus managed not only as a military undertaking but also as a diplomatic and perceptual exercise.[44]

Following the Committee's directives, preparations were initiated immediately, with the goal of completing temporary depots and supply points by the autumn of 1839. The timing was handled with acute political sensitivity. It was estimated that the British military presence in Afghanistan could persist until the spring of 1840, making it strategically imperative to bring Khiva under control by that date. Consequently, the mission's objectives extended beyond the liberation of captives; political restructuring, such as the deposition of the Khivan Khan and his replacement with a Russian-aligned Kazakh sultan, became integral to the plan. The Committee further decreed that the operation should proceed even if the Khan acceded to Russian demands. While the release of captives would be welcomed, it was stipulated that the costs of the expedition would be extracted from Khiva as reparations.[45] This approach demonstrates that the campaign was designed not as a temporary instrument of pressure, but as a definitive intervention to be executed regardless of Khivan concessions. The principle of secrecy was also maintained in the financial framework. An allocation of 1,698,000 rubles and 12,000 gold ducats was drawn from the special funds of the Ministry of War to ensure that these sums remained absent from official budget documents. Perovsky was granted an initial expenditure authority of 700,000 rubles and permitted to utilize local artillery and engineering resources to the fullest extent. Financial oversight was relaxed in favor of a simplified reporting system based on Perovsky's personal

[42] S. N. Sevastyanov, "Sobytiya v Orenburgskom Kraye, Podgotovivshiye Ekspeditsiyu v Khivu v 1839–1840 gg.," *Trudy Orenburgskoy Uchenoy Arkhivnoy Komissii 16* (Orenburg: Parovaya Tipo-litografiya F. G. Karimova, 1906), 109.; Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody*, 48.

[43] P. İ. Tsipliaev, "Pisma Grafa V. A. Perovskogo k A. Ya. Bulgakovu," *Russkiy Arkhiv: Istoriko-Literaturnyy Sbornik v 155 Tomakh,*". Vol. 36. Edited by P. I. Bartenev, (Moscow: Alfaret, 2010), 36.

[44] Zakharyina, *Zimnii Pohod*, 24.

[45] A. Morrison, "Twin Imperial Disasters. The invasions of Khiva and Afghanistan in the Russian and British Official Mind, 1839 – 1842," *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no.1 (2014): 277; Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pokhody*, 48-49; S. Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela,"28-29; D. Golosov, "Pohod v Khivu v 1839 Godu Otryada Russkikh Voisk, Pod Nachalstvom General-Adyutanta Perovskago," *Voennyi Sbornik* XXIX, no. 1-2 (1863): 62-63.

accounts rather than standardized procedures.[46]

The route of the expedition was also finalized during this phase. Three primary corridors were debated within the Committee. The first option, the Krasnovodsk route across the Caspian Sea, previously used by Muravyov, was deemed impracticable due to the unpredictable stance of Turkmen tribes and insufficient naval transport capacity.[47] The second option, via the Aral Sea and the Syr Darya, offered advantages in terms of water and grazing land but was rejected due to major river crossings and the scarcity of water in the Kyzylkum desert.[48] Ultimately, the Orenburg–Orsk–Emba–Ak-Bulak–Chushka-Kul line, spanning approximately 1,375–1,484 km along the western shores of the Aral Sea and across the Ustyurt Plateau, was selected.[49] This choice was rooted in existing Russian geographical knowledge and administrative practice. Since the 18th century, the Orenburg line had served as the primary nexus for military, diplomatic, and commercial activities toward the Kazakh steppe. The absence of major river crossings was viewed as a tactical advantage for mobility. Colonel Berg's 1825–1826 surveys and mapping of the Ustyurt region also influenced this decision.[50] The plan involved establishing intermediate supply depots to allow troops to rest and replenish. While Doguz-Tua was initially designated as a supply point, reconnaissance in 1839 revealed insufficient water and grazing, leading to the relocation of the main supply centers to Emba and Ak-Bulak.[51]

The timing of the expedition became a subject of critical debate. While the Committee initially envisioned a spring 1840 launch, Perovsky altered the plan to a winter commencement.[52] This preference was based on the assumption that the winter snowpack would serve as a natural water source—offsetting the extreme heat and water scarcity of the summer—and that the frozen ground would facilitate the transport of heavy equipment.[53] This approach reflects a typical feature of Russian military planning, which often regarded winter conditions as a logistical advantage.[54] However, such planning relegated the reality of increased fuel and subsistence needs in the sub-zero temperatures of the steppe to the background, grounding the entire operation on a significant logistical risk.[55] Economic and political anxieties further reinforced this precarious choice. The expectation that transport animals would become more expensive in spring, as Kazakhs moved to their summer quarters, prompted Perovsky to act hastily.[56] In this sense, the winter expedition reflected a planning logic in which cost calculations overrode military prudence. While Perovsky sought to legitimize this decision by invoking historical precedents like Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, these references primarily served as a discursive shield for the political urgency created by the British presence in Afghanistan.[57] Indeed, the principal catalyst for this risky venture was the imperial panic in St. Petersburg regarding British expansion. Reports of twenty-five British agents in the Khivan region created a sense of urgency

[46] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 28-29.
[47] *A Narrative of*, 41.
[48] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 21-22.
[49] Zakharyina, *Zimnii Pohod*, 27
[50] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pokhody*, 41; Ivanov, *Hivinskaya Ekspeditsia*, 18.
[51] Sevastyovnov, "Sobyatiya v Orenburgskom", 109; Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody*,65-66.
[52] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 27-28.
[53] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody*, 48-51; *A Narative of*, 79-81.
[54] Morrison, *The Russian*, 109-110.
[55] Golosov, "Pohod v Khivu", 85.
[56] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 31; Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 76.
[57] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pokhody*, 54.

that sidelined technical deficiencies in favor of strategic necessity.[58]

The Winter Campaign Forces assembled under Perovsky's command represented one of the most remarkable examples of 19th-century Russian military engineering and imperial planning on (Table 1)[59]:

Arm of Service	Strength / Number
Infantry	3.041
Cavalry	1.778
Artillery	268
Topographer	20 (6 Officer, 14 NCO)
Sapyor	6 (1 Officer, 5Enlisted)
Engineering Elements	130
Provost Marshal	1
Orderly	64 Infantry, 25 Cavalry, 11 Artillery=100
Religious Services / Clergy	1 priest, 4 church staff= 5
Clerk	124
Interpreter	3

Table *1:* Personnel Composition of the 1839 Khiva Expeditionary Force

The firepower to be managed and directed by this artillery personnel is presented in the table below (Table 2)[60]

Category	Quantity	Calibre
Battery Gun	2	12 pounder
Cavalry (Horse Artillery) Guns	2	6 pounder
Licorne Howitzer (Unicorn Howitzer)	2	10 pounder
Coehorn Mortar	6	6 pounder

[58] Kochnev, "Politika Rossii", 121-122.
[59] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 20-21; *A Narative of*, 101-102; Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 205-208.
[60] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 20-21; Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 59-60.

Cast-iron Falconet	2	1 pounder

Table 2 the army's firepower

The expeditionary force's ammunition stocks and technical equipment were systematically listed in the inventory records. (Table 3)[61]

Category	**Type of Ammunition**	**Quantity**	
Artillery firepower	10-pounder unicorn howitzers	200 shells	For siege operations and open-field engagements
	Coehorn mortars	6 units with 1,200 shells	Designed for use against fortifications
	Congreve rockets	325 units with 50 launch frames	
Small arms | 2,750	Infantry rifles |	2.750 (+200 reserves)	
Ammunition	Cartridges for infantry rifles	1.200.000	
	Pistol cartridges	204.000	
	Reserve ammunition cartridges	150.000	Intended for securing supply routes
Technical equipment	Lead	163,8 kg	
	Gunpowder	2.457 kg	
	Galvanic apparatus (used for electrical ignition)	2	

Talbe 3 the army's ammunition holdings

The composition of the expeditionary forces represented an ambitious example of 19th-century Russian military planning. However, the technical equipment was poorly suited to the portability and supply constraints imposed by steppe conditions. The decisive factor here was

[61] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 108-112; Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohod*, 59-61.

not technological superiority, but the sustainability of the supply chain.[62]

Staff officers based the transport system on camel caravans. Camels were favored for their resilience to thirst, their ability to subsist on low-quality forage, and their capacity to carry three to four times more weight than horses. It was also envisioned that once acclimatized to harnesses, they could be used for personnel transport, with an estimated capacity of 8 to 10 people per camel. Thus, camel transport was planned as a complementary element to reduce the physical attrition of infantry during long marches.[63] Attempts to transport soldiers in baskets suspended from camels were abandoned when the method proved ineffective.[64] Special large-wheeled, long-bodied wagons were manufactured to maintain the pace of the advance in specific sectors.[65] However, the acquisition process revealed a disconnect between the planned order and the reality on the ground. Perovsky initially intended to purchase camels on behalf of the army, but many of the acquired animals were found to be exhausted and unfit for heavy transport. This led to a shift from purchasing to a more viable leasing model, where camels were hired alongside their owners to ensure experienced handling. Despite promises of tax exemptions for Kazakhs who leased their animals, the required numbers remained elusive.[66] Russian authorities calculated a need for 12,600 camels based on a load of 196–245 kg per animal; however, the army eventually set out with only 10,450. Of these, 8,831 were used for provisions and 1,435 for military baggage. This data shows that the transport system began the operation with a 20% capacity deficit, while the poor quality of the animals strained the system from the outset.[67]

The logistical failures of the expedition cannot be attributed solely to climatic conditions. In this respect, the acquisition of camels became a focal point of administrative malfeasance and a lack of oversight. While the failure of the 1839–1840 Winter Expedition is often explained through environmental factors, the internal mechanisms of the transport and subsistence units played a decisive role. At the center of this process was Major-General Tsiolkovsky, who was responsible for the expedition's transport. The institutional weakness that Morrison defines as "imperial administrative laxity" was embodied in Tsiolkovsky's case through budgetary irregularities and practices that diminished the effectiveness of the camel transport.[68] Perovsky's grant of extensive, unregulated spending authority to Tsiolkovsky for the procurement of 20,000 camels increased the potential for embezzlement.[69] Records indicate that high-quality camels grazed on behalf of the state were clandestinely transferred to the army contractor Zaychikov for cash.[70] Such practices weakened the quality of the animals before the operation even began, widening the gap between planning and execution. Furthermore, Tsiolkovsky's exclusive authority over assessing the suitability of the animals allowed him to manipulate supply reports for personal gain, as reflected in contemporary accounts.[71]

As it was anticipated that the expedition would be conducted under severe winter conditions,

[62] For a detailed discussion of this issue, see Morrison, *Russian Conquest*, 94–107.
[63] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela",25.
[64] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody*,64.
[65] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 25,37.
[66] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 75.
[67] Tsipliaev, "Pisma Grafa", 156,157.
[68] A. Morrison "Camels and Colonial Armies. The Logistics of Warfare in Central Asia in the Early 19th Century", *Journal of the Economic & Social History of the Orient* 57, no.4 (2014): 449-452.
[69] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 75.
[70] E. Kosirev, "Pohod v Hivu v 1839 Gadu (İz Zapisak Ucastnika)", *İstoriko Literaturniy Jurnal* (1898): 542.
[71] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody*,50.

clothing and subsistence preparations were prioritized. A specialized winter uniform system was developed; however, this equipment significantly restricted the soldiers' mobility. Contemporary accounts described the appearance of the soldiers in these garments as akin to a legion of demons emerging from hell[72], indicating that the focus on protection from the cold had a limiting effect on military maneuverability. Soldiers were issued thick hats with neck protectors, sheepskin-lined waistcoats, and heavy overcoats. Kyrgyz wool was used for undergarments, while wide-cut trousers made of thick black cloth were designed to be tucked into coats and secured with special belts.[73] Footwear consisted of large felt-lined boots supported by wool and cotton socks. Removable rabbit-fur collars were added to overcoats, and black cloth masks were included to protect the face from frostbite. To mitigate the blinding glare of the sun on snow, black horsehair eyeshields were distributed. The boots were manufactured to be worn with thick *valenki*-style felt socks.[74]

Subsistence planning was based on the premise that regular resupply would be impossible during the winter. Therefore, the rations centered on durable and portable products. The backbone of the subsistence supply consisted of approximately 48,726 tons of hardtack (rusks), 13,198 tons of oatmeal, 18,857 tons of flour, and 234 tons of salted meat.[75] Special ovens were established along riverbanks to ensure a continuous supply of hardtack before the operation. However, technical assessments suggest significant limitations in the design of the subsistence system.[76] Rations were not calculated solely on calories and durability; the morale of the soldiers and their resilience to the cold were also considered. To this end, between 51,645 and 101,912 liters of alcohol were dispatched, along with 8,190 kg of honey and various spices for *sbiten*, a traditional hot beverage. Large quantities of leaf tobacco and tea were also allocated for the lower ranks. Medical risks were factored into the preparations. Large stocks of dried and pickled cabbage and cucumbers were provided to counter the threat of scurvy, along with 32,000 onions and 3,300 heads of garlic. The inclusion of vinegar, horseradish, and mustard indicates that the sustenance was managed within a framework of disease prevention. Furthermore, the use of *krut* to improve the taste and nutritional value of water was also notable.[77]

3. Campaign Developments

Following the completion of logistical preparations, the expeditionary units assembled before the Samara Fortress at 09:30 on November 18, 1839. In anticipation of the severe frost, specialized sledge systems had been prepared to accompany the march. At 11:00, Perovsky addressed the troops, emphasizing discipline and morale. However, the fact that it took several hours for the units to fully vacate the assembly area revealed, from the very first day, the immense difficulty of maintaining a consistent tempo and order in such a vast force.[78] Perovsky divided the army into four main columns: the vanguard and snow-clearing unit under Lieutenant Colonel Tolmachev; the second column led by Colonel Kuzminsky; the main force under Colonel Mansurov; and the logistical rearguard commanded by Major General Tsiolkovsky. The staff was

[72] Kosirev, "Pohod v Hivu",540.
[73] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 143.
[74] Kosirev, "Pohod v Hivu", 539.
[75] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 75-80.
[76] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 24-25.
[77] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 141-142.
[78] M. Özkan, "İklimle Savaş; Perosvskiy'nin Hive Seferi (1839-1840)", *Türkistan'dan Anadolu'ya Tarihin İzinde: Prof. Dr. Mehmet Alpargu'ya Aramağa*. Vol. 1. Editör Zeynep İskefiyeli, M. Bilal Çelik (Ankara: Nobel, 2020), 262.

completed by Colonel Hemerling as chief of staff and Colonel Bizyanov as artillery commander.[79]

As the Russian army advanced, the Khanate of Khiva was alerted through its intelligence networks. Upon receiving this intelligence, Allah Quli Khan convened his state council (*meşveret*). While some officials argued that the Russian intent was merely a display of force and that a winter campaign would inevitably result in their ruin, others suggested seeking peace through envoys. The Khan adopted a cautious but firm stance, instructing that public panic be avoided while commanding his military leaders to ensure that troops and provisions were fully mobilized.[80] Simultaneously, Great Britain intervened diplomatically. Major Todd, the British representative in Herat, dispatched a respected cleric, Mullah Hussain, with a friendly missive to Khiva. Allah Quli Khan, in turn, redirected his envoy, Shukrullah Efendi, to Britain to request military assistance, specifically firearms and artillery. These contacts eventually led to the mission of James Abbott, who reached Khiva while the Russian expedition was still in the field.[81] Abbott argued that the liberation of Russian captives was the only factor capable of averting intervention, but the Khan, citing security concerns, refused to send the captives with Abbott, instead dispatching him to Orenburg with a letter for the Tsar.[82]

While these diplomatic maneuvers continued, the steppe winter rapidly exposed the disconnect between Russian planning and field reality. Persistent blizzards and sub-zero temperatures drastically slowed the pace, and the specialized clothing issued for the campaign became a liability that restricted the soldiers' mobility. Military efficiency plummeted; it was recorded that some soldiers, once fallen, were unable to rise without assistance.[83] Perspiration during physical exertion froze on the soldiers' bodies once they remained stationary on camels, leading to severe illnesses. The wool linings in the uniforms proved ineffective, and the overall design of the coats and trousers was found to be functionally incompatible with the rigors of the field.[84] The haste in production and lack of quality control deepened these issues; the wool linings shifted and bunched at the hems, leaving the torso inadequately protected. Quantitative data confirms this deficiency: the 3,208 jackets and 3,458 pairs of trousers procured were significantly insufficient for the 5,162 soldiers.[85]

To view these as mere manufacturing errors would be superficial. Data from Ivanov and Zykov indicate that the process was plagued by profound bureaucratic negligence. Zykov's technical evaluations show that significant failures in oversight had manifested even before the march.[86] Terentyev emphasizes that the allocation of only 2 million rubles against a required budget of 6 million provided logistical officers with a pretext for negligence. A truly impartial investigation would have inevitably resulted in severe sanctions for Tsiolkovsky.[87] Instead of standard sheepskins suitable for –40°C, low-quality wool haphazardly sewn onto canvas was used to cut costs.[88] Consequently, the clothing became a primary cause of fatigue and fatal

[79] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 107-110,120.
[80] Ogohiy, *Riyozu-d-Davla*, 224-247.
[81] Morrison, *The Russian Conquest*, 108.
[82] James Abbott, *Narrative of a Journey from Heraut to Khiva, Moscow and St. Petersburg During the Late Russian Invasion of Khiva*. Vol. 1. (London: Wm. H. Allen and Co., 1843), 1, 111.
[83] Zakharyina, *Zimnii Pohod*, 40.
[84] Kosirev, "Pohod v Hivu", 539.
[85] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody*,59.
[86] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 25-26.
[87] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pohody*, 59.
[88] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 75-78.

diseases such as pneumonia. Soldiers also contended with the white wall of steppe blizzards. Visibility vanished, and units frequently lost contact, leading to a breakdown in the chain of command. As the cold intensified, the failure of the issued clothing drove soldiers to consume increasing amounts of alcohol in a desperate search for warmth, thereby heightening the risk of severe hypothermia.[89]The weight of equipment made marching through deep snow agonizing; fatigue and disease became pervasive. Simultaneously, the rising mortality of transport animals caused critical disruptions in the delivery of provisions.[90] Perovsky's correspondence reveals a growing realization of the disaster; on January 4, 1840, he described the season as the greatest winter of all time, an admission of the dire situation shared by both the rank and file and the command.[91]

The decisive factor in the collapse was the balance between fuel and transport. The near impossibility of sourcing wood in the steppe meant that provisions froze and became an unusable burden. During the retreat, the exhaustion of fuel forced soldiers to burn wooden boats, sledges, and spare ropes just to cook, illustrating the critical role of fuel in the survival chain.[92] The ultimate breaking point was the fodder for the transport animals. When the stocks of oats and hay were exhausted, starving camels began to tear apart hardtack crates and flour sacks, leading to a self-consuming cycle of subsistence.[93] Before even nearing its objectives, the army transformed into a structure that consumed its own resources under the weight of its energy costs. Budgetary constraints compromised the quality of the rations; some hardtack was sourced from damp warehouses and became rock-hard in the cold, leading to widespread digestive ailments among the troops.[94]

By early December, the Khivan leadership interpreted the weakening Russian force as a strategic opportunity. The court was informed moment by moment of the soldiers freezing at Chushka-Kul and the camels perishing. This prompted Allah Quli Khan to declare a general mobilization. He entrusted the command to his son, Rahmanquli Töre, supported by an elite staff including Atamurad Kushbegi, Avazkhoja Sheikh-ul-Islam, Sayyid Nazarbiy, and Muhammad Niyoz Yasavulbashi. Experienced leaders such as Davlatnazarbiy and Pahlavon Niyozbiy were also integrated into the structure.[95] A cavalry force of approximately 8,000 was assembled from the Yamut, Teke, and Chovdur tribes, bolstered by a steady flow of grain from regional centers. Meanwhile, the Russian units continued their advance, clashing with Khivan forces at Besh-Tumak on December 5, 1839. While the engagement ended unfavorably for the Russians, it remained a limited military encounter.[96]

The Russian army reached the Emba Fortress on December 19, but the exhaustion of the troops was now critical. On December 30, 1839, a Khivan force of 2,000–3,000 attacked Ak-Bulak from the north and east, placing the limited Russian garrison under immense pressure, though the defense held through artillery fire.[97] As the Russian units attempted to retreat, they were harassed by Khivan forces focusing on the horses and camels. The detachment successfully repelled the

[89] Özkan, "İklimle Savaş", 263.
[90] A. I. Dal, "Pisma k Druzyam iz Pohod v Hivu", *Russkiy Arhiv 3* (1867), 404, 411-412.
[91] Dal, "Pisma k Druzyam", 401.
[92] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pokhody*, 94-104.
[93] Ivanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 104-105.
[94] Terentyev, *Khivinskie Pokhody*, 94-104.
[95] Ogohiy, *Riyazu-d-Davla*, 317.
[96] Ünal, *Sultan Kenasarı*, 136.
[97] Ogohiy, *Riyazu-d-Davla*, 246; *Narrative of*, 146-147; Kosirev, "Pohod v Hivu", 542.

attacks using superior firepower, though they suffered casualties.[98] By January 12, 1840, Perovsky formally assessed that the capacity to sustain the campaign had effectively ceased to exist.[99] Realizing that a further advance would result in catastrophic losses, Perovsky announced the retreat on February 1, 1840. The final toll of 1,054 dead and 629 hospitalized clearly defines the disastrous outcome of the campaign.[100]

4. Consequences of the 1839–1840 Khiva Campaign

Following the failure of the 1839–1840 Winter Expedition, the Russian Empire initiated extensive preparations for a potential secondary military intervention. However, this planning was scrutinized in the light of the immense fiscal burden and operational difficulties encountered during the first campaign. The initial foray had not only failed to achieve its military objectives but had imposed a significantly higher cost on the imperial budget than anticipated, necessitating a re-evaluation of the expedition's scale.[101] Consequently, a second expedition was designed to be approximately three times the size of the first in terms of manpower, logistical capacity, and firepower. The projected force exceeded 19,000 soldiers, supported by twelve 6-pounder guns and various howitzers. Despite this increase in capacity, Russian statesmen opted for more limited strategic goals. Acknowledging that permanent dominance in Turkestan could not be established through a single campaign, the objectives were narrowed to penalizing the Khanate, liberating Russian slaves, and facilitating a regime change under favorable conditions. The logistical scale of this second planning phase was unprecedented, envisioning a transport train of 17,000 camels, 15,000 horses, and 6,000 oxen, with a budget calculated at approximately 9.4 million rubles.[102] However, this staggering figure prompted political caution rather than reinforcing military resolve. The Tsar's decision to have a special committee investigate Perovsky's insistence on another winter campaign, coupled with Rear Admiral Rimsky-Korsakov's exploration of transport options via the Caspian Sea, reflected, in turn, deep-seated reservations about embarking on another uncertain operation.[103] Ultimately, this massive military buildup never transitioned into a field offensive. Instead, it served as a formidable instrument of diplomatic coercion. The force held in readiness along the Orenburg line became Russia's most potent bargaining tool during the 1841 Nikiforov and 1842 Danilevsky missions. Even in the absence of active engagement, the Khanate was forced to contend with the reality of such mobilized military capacity.

During this period, British interventions were decisive. Major Todd's dispatch of Richmond Shakespear to Allah Quli Khan in 1840 aimed to prevent the crisis from escalating into a full-scale war. Shakespear argued that liberating the Russian captives—the primary casus belli for St. Petersburg—was the only way to avert disaster, citing the lack of significant Khivan success at Ak-Bulak as a warning.[104] On July 19, 1840, Allah Quli Khan issued a decree strictly forbidding the plundering or enslavement of Russian subjects under penalty of death.[105] Shakespear

[98] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", 43-44.
[99] Tsipliaev, Pisma Grafa, 41-43.
[100] Kosirev, "Pohod v Hivu", 543-544.
[101] Tsipliaev, Pisma Grafa, 53.
[102] Zykov, "Hivinskie Dela", II, 2-4.
[103] İvanov, *Khivinskaya Ekspeditsiya*, 201-202.
[104] R. Shakespear, "A Personal Narrative of a Journey from Heraut to Ourenburg on the Caspian in 1840", *Blackwoods Edunburg Mafazine* VLI, no: CCCXX (1842): 691-692.
[105] G. Kara, "Rus Elçisi Yüzbaşı P. A. Nikiforov'un Hive Hanlığı'na Elçilik Seferi ve Neticeleri (1841)", *Çakü Sosyalbilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 15, no. 2 (2024):254.

personally identified and escorted 416 Russian captives to Orenburg via Novo-Aleksandrovsk in October 1840.[106]This effectively stripped Russia of its primary justification for military intervention and, in effect, forced the Tsarist government toward a diplomatic resolution. Despite these maneuvers, Allah Quli Khan remained wary of both Christian powers, fearing they sought the eventual subjugation of Muslims.[107] Seeking a counterweight, he dispatched an envoy, Qutbuddin, to Istanbul to request Ottoman assistance, though he received no concrete support.[108] Ottoman records confirm this diplomatic impasse, noting reports that Perovsky's defeat necessitated a closer relationship with Khiva, yet no active military aid was forthcoming.[109]

Under these circumstances, Russia dispatched Captain Nikiforov to Khiva in 1841. However, the prior return of the captives facilitated by the British allowed Allah Quli Khan to resist further Russian demands. Nikiforov's aggressive and threatening tone regarding border regulations and commercial privileges led to the failure of the negotiations.[110] Russia subsequently adopted a more tempered approach, appointing the experienced Colonel G. I. Danilevsky to lead a new mission. Throughout this process, however, the military force stationed at Orenburg continued to exert silent pressure on the negotiations. The death of Allah Quli Khan and the subsequent political uncertainty during the reign of Rahim Quli Khan provided Danilevsky with further strategic leverage. The culmination of these efforts was the Treaty of Danilevsky, signed on December 27, 1842, which established peace and friendship between the two states. In practice, however, the treaty functioned as a framework for Russian tutelage. The Khanate committed to the total prohibition of the slave trade and the immediate repatriation of any Russian subjects captured in the future—a clause that effectively codified Russia's justifications for potential future intervention under international law. Furthermore, Russian merchants were granted freedom of travel and trade within the Khanate, with customs duties capped at 5%, thereby further consolidating Russia's economic dominance in the region. The Khanate also assumed responsibility for the security of caravans on the Orenburg-Khiva route and pledged to prevent the Kazakh and Kyrgyz tribes under its influence from raiding Russian borders.[111] Thus, while the 1839–1840 expedition ended in military disaster, subsequent diplomatic maneuvers, reinforced by the shadow of mobilized force, allowed Russia to achieve many of its strategic objectives through the 1842 treaty.

Conclusion

The Khiva Winter Expedition of 1839–1840 should be evaluated not as a sudden military reaction to slavery, trade disputes, or instability in the steppe, but within a broader strategic calculus aimed at consolidating the Russian Empire's position in Central Asia during an intensifying phase of the Great Game. Issues such as the question of slavery, the security of trade routes, and hegemony over the Kazakh steppe functioned as justifications that legitimized and accelerated the transition from strategic intent to field execution. In this environment of imperial rivalry, the Khanate of Khiva was not a random target but a deliberately chosen one. The decision

[106] Shakespear, *A Personal*, 717-720.

[107] Abbott, *Narrative of a Journey from Heraut to Khiva*, 107-108.

[108] M. Saray, *Rus İşgali Devrinde Osmanlı Devleti İle Türkistan Hanlıkları Arasındaki Siyasi Münasebetler (1775-1875)*. (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu 2017) 50.

[109] Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA.) Hariciye Nezareti Siyasi Kısım (BOA. HR. SYS.), 1334/27.

[110] Kara, "Rus Elçisi Yüzbaşı", 258-263.

[111] G. Kara, "Rus Elçisi G.İ. Danilevskiy'nin Hive Hanlığı Tasviri", *Türk Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi* 8, no.2 (2023): 110-114.

for intervention was not limited to an abstract reflex of competition; rather, it was systematically constructed through diplomatically defensible grounds, including the liberation of Russian subjects, the safeguarding of commercial corridors, and the pursuit of scientific exploration. British activities in Afghanistan and the Caspian basin transformed the "Khiva Question" from a matter of border security into an issue directly linked to the regional influence and prestige of the Russian Empire. However, this anxiety was formalized not through a language of overt military challenge to Britain, but through internationally acceptable humanitarian and economic arguments.

The commencement of the expedition during the winter months—contrary to frequent assertions in the literature—was not merely a result of geographical or climatic miscalculation; it was a direct consequence of the temporal pressure imposed by the Great Game. This urgency led to the premature deployment of a plan that had not yet fully matured in technical or logistical terms. Furthermore, the tendency in military reports to attribute the failure largely to extraordinary winter conditions should be interpreted less as an objective explanation of the collapse and more as a defensive rhetoric intended to obscure institutional failures. The inadequate uniforms, the frozen provisions that remained inedible due to lack of fuel, and a transport system that disintegrated under its own weight as it advanced, all demonstrate that the expedition succumbed not just to the climate, but to the inability of the Russian military-administrative apparatus to adapt to the rigors of the steppe.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of imperial policy, the Winter Expedition did not culminate in absolute failure. The military pressure and attrition in the field, bolstered by British mediation, pushed the Khanate of Khiva into a position more amenable to Russian demands, thereby accelerating the repatriation of captives. Consequently, St. Petersburg secured the opportunity to transform a military setback into a diplomatic gain. While the Treaty of Danilevsky in 1842 offered a facade of peace in the short term, it effectively narrowed Khiva's maneuverability through prohibitions on slavery, commercial privileges, and security regulations, anchoring future Russian interventions within a legal framework.

Ultimately, the 1839–1840 Khiva Winter Expedition serves as an instructive example of how military, administrative, and diplomatic strata intersect within geopolitical rivalry. This campaign clearly illustrates that the projection of power in the borderlands of empires depends not solely on military might, but on the level of preparation, the integrity of administrative decision-making processes, and the capacity for diplomatic maneuver.

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Summary

This study re-evaluates the Russian campaign against the Khanate of Khiva in 1839–1840 by examining the relationship among geopolitical rivalry, imperial legitimation, military planning, logistical capacity, and diplomatic outcomes. Existing scholarship has generally explained the expedition either in terms of the exceptional winter conditions of the Central Asian steppe or as an episode in a romanticized Anglo-Russian rivalry. Neither interpretation is sufficient on its own. The central research question is how the campaign should be understood when its public justifications, decision-making, logistical preparations, military execution, and diplomatic aftermath are considered together. The study asks why the expedition was launched at that particular moment, why winter was chosen, how administrative and logistical deficiencies affected its outcome, and how military failure was ultimately converted into diplomatic leverage. The study employs a source-based comparative historical approach and reconstructs the campaign chronologically through its planning, execution, and aftermath. Russian military reports, correspondence, participants' memoirs, campaign narratives, and logistical inventories are examined alongside Muhammad Riza Ogohiy's Khivan chronicle, British diplomatic and travel accounts, an Ottoman archival document, and modern scholarship. Russian claims concerning slavery, trade, and border security are evaluated against Khivan, British, and Ottoman evidence. Quantitative data on expenditure, personnel, transport animals, clothing, provisions, and casualties are used to compare official plans with the expedition's actual logistical capacity.

The findings demonstrate that slavery, caravan security, commercial disputes, and competition in the Kazakh steppe were genuine and longstanding concerns. Nevertheless, the Russian administration selected and reframed these issues as a coherent *casus belli* for an intervention driven by broader strategic considerations. The British occupation of Afghanistan in 1838 and reports of British agents in Khiva created a sense of urgency in St. Petersburg. This pressure accelerated preparations, encouraged secrecy under the cover of an Aral scientific expedition, and expanded the campaign's objectives beyond the liberation of captives to include political intervention in the Khanate. The decision to begin the campaign in winter was based partly on the expectation that snow would provide water and frozen ground would facilitate transport. Economic calculations and the perceived need to act before the British position in Afghanistan changed were equally decisive. Political urgency thus outweighed unresolved technical problems. Severe weather exposed, rather than independently caused, the expedition's collapse. The army departed with fewer camels than required, many of which were unfit for transport. Weak financial supervision, irregular procurement, inadequate clothing, insufficient fuel, frozen provisions, and fodder shortages progressively undermined the supply system. By February 1840, continued advance had become impossible, and the campaign ended with 1,054 deaths and 629 soldiers hospitalized.

The expedition's military failure did not result in complete political failure. British mediation secured the release of 416 Russian captives in 1840, removing Russia's principal public justification for renewed intervention. Nevertheless, preparations for a second campaign and the concentration of forces along the Orenburg-line maintained pressure on Khiva. Following the unsuccessful Nikiforov mission of 1841, Danilevsky's negotiations produced the treaty of 27 December 1842. Under the treaty, Khiva prohibited the enslavement of Russian subjects, accepted obligations concerning their return, granted privileges to Russian merchants, limited customs duties to five percent, and assumed responsibility for caravan and frontier security. The article concludes that the Great Game influenced the expedition's timing and risk calculations rather than merely providing its geopolitical background. It challenges climatic determinism by demonstrating the decisive role of administrative integrity, transportation, provisioning, and oversight in the campaign's failure. Although the Russian army failed to reach Khiva, the continuing threat of force, diplomacy, and British mediation enabled the empire to transform military failure into diplomatic leverage.