

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reassessing Khiva–Russian Relations (1806–1825): A Historiographical And Archival Study Of The Reign Of Muhammad Rahimkhan I

Saparbaev Bunyod Khurrambek ogli

Doctor of philosophy (PhD) in Historical sciences, Docent, Associate Professor of the Department of "History" of the Urgench State University named after Abu Rayhan Biruni, Uzbekistan

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Abstract

This article examines diplomatic and political relations between the Khiva Khanate and the Russian Empire during the reign of Muhammad Rahimkhan I (1806–1825) through a combined historiographical and archival perspective. Drawing on Khorezmian narrative sources—most notably Firdaws ul-Iqbal—and Russian diplomatic and administrative documentation, the study reassesses the character of early nineteenth-century Khiva–Russia interactions beyond descriptive or teleological interpretations. Methodologically, the article integrates historiographical review with contextual analysis of frontier correspondence, trade reports, and diplomatic exchanges. The findings demonstrate that relations between Khiva and Russia were shaped by pragmatic negotiation, selective cooperation, and continuous mutual assessment rather than by linear imperial expansion. Khiva emerges as an active diplomatic actor seeking political stability, regulated trade, and autonomy under conditions of asymmetrical power. By situating Khiva within broader analytical frameworks of frontier politics and imperial governance, the article contributes to international debates on Central Asian diplomacy, non-European political agency, and early modern imperial interaction.

KEY WORDS

Khiva Khanate; Russian Empire; Muhammad Rahimkhan I; frontier diplomacy; historiography; archival sources; Central Asia.

INTRODUCTION

The first quarter of the nineteenth century marked a period of significant transformation in Central Asia. The Khiva Khanate, under Muhammad Rahimkhan I (1806–1825), experienced internal consolidation, administrative reform, and cautious diplomatic engagement. Concurrently, the Russian Empire deepened its strategic, economic, and geopolitical interest in the region, seeking trade security, frontier stability, and intelligence on neighboring polities. Existing historiography has traditionally relied on narrative sources produced within Khorezm, notably Firdaws ul-Iqbal, which provides rich

insights into political, social, and cultural life. These sources, however, reflect court-centered perspectives requiring contextualization. Russian archival documentation, produced by frontier and diplomatic administrations, offers complementary evidence: bureaucratic evaluations, policy deliberations, and practical assessments of Khiva's internal stability and external behavior. By systematically integrating these two source traditions, this article reconstructs Khiva–Russia relations during Muhammad Rahimkhan I's reign, demonstrating Khiva's diplomatic agency and the Russian

Empire's pragmatic frontier strategy. This dual perspective moves beyond descriptive historiography to a more analytical and internationally comparative understanding of Central Asian diplomacy.

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL REVIEW

Uzbek historiography has played a decisive role in preserving and analyzing Khorezmian sources. Q. Munirov [1] (2002) situates Firdaws ul-Iqbal within the continuum of Khorezmian historiography, beginning with Abulgazi Bahadurkhan and later developed by Shermuhammad Munis and Muhammad Riza Ogahiy [3]. Munirov emphasizes the continuity of narrative conventions, ideological frameworks, and literary strategies. F. Ghanihojayev [2] (1986) catalogued six manuscript copies of Firdaws ul-Iqbal, detailing provenance, copyists, and current repositories in St. Petersburg and Tashkent [4]. Karimov, Dolimov, and Abdullayev highlighted the literary richness, political ideology, and socio-cultural observations embedded in the chronicle [5][6]. Recent scholars, including G. Kholliyeva (2009), focused on the prefaces and structural composition of the work, highlighting the integration of moral, religious, and political commentary as a source of historical insight [7][8]. Despite these achievements, much of the literature remains descriptive. Diplomatic relations with Russia are often mentioned in passing rather than systematically analyzed. Soviet-era interpretations imposed ideological frameworks, framing Khiva either as a passive object or in teleological terms, which obscured the pragmatic nature of Khivan governance.

FIRDAWS UL-IQBAL: ANALYSIS OF CHAPTERS AND THEMES

Firdaws ul-Iqbal can be divided into four major thematic clusters: Political History and Court Affairs: The chronicle details the succession, consolidation of authority, tribal integration, and internal reform under Muhammad Rahimkhan I [9]. Events are described with moral commentary, emphasizing justice, order, and legitimacy. Russian envoys, merchants, and interactions are woven into these narratives, demonstrating an awareness of Khiva's position within broader regional networks. Diplomatic and Foreign Relations: Relations with neighboring khanates, including Bukhara and Khokand, as well as with Russia, are recorded. Diplomatic missions are described with attention to ceremonial and protocol details, signaling Khiva's political sophistication. The text also encodes negotiation strategies through moral and symbolic language

[10]. Economic Life and Trade Regulation: Chapters covering trade describe caravan routes, taxation, and merchant protection, reflecting administrative priorities and the khanate's concern for economic stability [11]. These accounts align closely with Russian archival evidence, allowing cross-verification of incidents such as Yomut and Chovdur raids. Cultural and Ideological Narratives: Poetry, Qur'anic allusions, aphorisms, and anecdotal material embed political events within normative frameworks. This literary dimension enhances legitimacy while reflecting the cultural sophistication of the Khorezmian elite [12][13]. The value of Firdaws ul-Iqbal lies not in neutral reporting but in the constructed perspective of Khivan authority, revealing how internal politics, foreign diplomacy, and moral ideology intersected.

RUSSIAN ARCHIVAL SOURCES AND FRONTIER POLICY

Russian archival sources provide complementary evidence, capturing policy deliberations and practical assessments. Relevant collections include: AVPRI (Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire): Diplomatic correspondence regarding frontier management, trade regulation, and tribal disturbances [14]. RGIA (Russian State Historical Archive): Orenburg and Astrakhan frontier reports, memoranda on Khiva's internal stability, and intelligence on tribal movements [15]. These documents consistently depict Khiva as politically significant yet manageable. Russian officials distinguished between central authority and independent tribal actors, attributing raids to Yomut and Chovdur groups rather than deliberate Khivan policy [16]. Trade protection, negotiation, and conflict mediation are emphasized, demonstrating pragmatic engagement rather than coercive expansion.

ARCHIVAL CASE STUDY: TRADE, SECURITY, AND NEGOTIATION

Trade formed the practical core of Khiva–Russia relations during Muhammad Rahimkhan I's reign. Caravan commerce connected Khiva to Orenburg, Astrakhan, and the Volga region, providing mutual economic benefits but also exposing both sides to security risks [17]. Russian archival correspondence regularly addressed these vulnerabilities, emphasizing merchant protection, recovery of stolen goods, and prevention of escalatory violence [18]. Reports from the Orenburg administration frequently attributed raids along caravan routes to Yomut and Chovdur Turkmen groups rather than Khivan authorities directly [19]. This distinction reflected

Russian recognition of Khiva's limited but genuine capacity to govern. Diplomatic exchanges included assurances from the khanate to investigate and punish offenders, interpreted by Russian administrators as indicators of Khiva's reliability and willingness to maintain negotiated stability. Cross-referencing Firdaws ul-Iqbal with Russian documentation illustrates the dual function of internal reforms. Measures recorded in the chronicle, such as reinforcement of local judicial authority and regulation of caravan taxation, simultaneously acted as diplomatic signals aimed at reassuring Russian counterparts and deterring punitive intervention [20]. This demonstrates the adaptive governance strategy of Muhammad Rahimkhan I, balancing internal consolidation with external negotiation.

IDEOLOGICAL, LITERARY, AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS

Firdaws ul-Iqbal integrates prose narrative with poetry, Qur'anic allusions, and aphorisms, embedding political events within a normative framework [21]. The literary strategies employed serve to:

Legitimize Muhammad Rahimkhan I's authority in a period of internal contestation.

Communicate moral and political norms to both local elites and external actors.

Record diplomatic and military encounters with symbolic and didactic undertones.

From an international perspective, this literary framing should be interpreted as statecraft embedded in narrative, rather than as anecdotal embellishment. Russian archival records corroborate these practices: officials noted ceremonial aspects of diplomacy, including the reception of envoys and gift exchanges, which Firdaws ul-Iqbal depicts through moralized and symbolic language [22]. Additionally, ethnographic information within the chronicle, such as the description of tribal customs, weddings, and funerary rites, provides indirect evidence of social cohesion and governance practices. For example, Rakhmonquli Tora's depiction of Hazorasp wedding ceremonies reveals the interplay between tribal loyalty and central authority, illuminating the social fabric underlying Khiva's political strategies [23].

SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS: DIPLOMACY UNDER ASYMMETRICAL CONDITIONS

Integrating historiographical and archival evidence allows

Khiva–Russia relations to be interpreted as a structured process of negotiation rather than a precursor to inevitable conquest. Key analytical points include:

- 1. Asymmetrical power relations:** Khiva operated as a frontier polity constrained by internal tribal dynamics and limited fiscal capacity, yet maintained sufficient institutional coherence to negotiate with Russia [24].
- 2. Pragmatic Russian engagement:** Early nineteenth-century Russian officials prioritized trade security, intelligence gathering, and conflict management over immediate territorial expansion [25].
- 3. Adaptive Khivan diplomacy:** The khanate's measures to regulate caravan routes, administer justice, and integrate tribal groups served both domestic and external signaling functions [26].
- 4. Integration of cultural and moral authority:** Literary and ideological constructs within Firdaws ul-Iqbal complemented pragmatic policy, providing moral legitimacy and reinforcing diplomatic credibility [27].

The combination of these factors reflects a sophisticated frontier diplomacy in which both Khiva and Russia exercised agency within structural constraints.

RUSSIAN DIPLOMATIC PERCEPTIONS OF KHIVA (1806–1825)

Analysis of Russian archival correspondence provides insight into how Khiva was perceived by frontier and imperial administrators. Reports emphasize: The personal authority of Muhammad Rahimkhan I and his ability to enforce order among nomadic tribes. Distinctions between state-directed and independent tribal actions, particularly regarding raids along caravan routes [28]. Preferences for negotiation and incentives over punitive expeditions, reflecting risk-averse frontier policy [29]. For example, letters from the Orenburg administration in 1812–1815 describe negotiations over the return of captured Russian merchants, highlighting Khiva's responsiveness and the Russian reliance on diplomatic channels rather than military enforcement [30]. Archival memoranda confirm that Russian officials consistently monitored the khanate's administrative capacity, demonstrating an appreciation for Khiva's agency and internal governance [31]. These findings contrast with later nineteenth-century imperial discourse, which increasingly depicted Central Asian polities as backward and unstable. The

period of Muhammad Rahimkhan I reveals a more nuanced and balanced interaction, emphasizing pragmatic accommodation and reciprocal assessment.

CONCLUSION

The combined historiographical and archival analysis demonstrates that Khiva–Russia relations during Muhammad Rahimkhan I's reign were characterized by pragmatic negotiation, strategic adaptation, and institutional coherence. Key conclusions include: Khiva exercised active agency in negotiating trade, security, and diplomatic arrangements, contrary to portrayals of passivity. Russian engagement was primarily pragmatic, aimed at protecting economic interests and frontier stability rather than immediate territorial conquest. *Firdaws ul-Iqbal* complements archival evidence by revealing the ideological and cultural strategies underpinning Khivan authority. Integrating narrative and bureaucratic sources provides a methodological model for the study of frontier diplomacy, asymmetrical power relations, and non-European state agency. This research underscores the importance of a dual-source approach, which enables a nuanced and internationally comparative understanding of early nineteenth-century Central Asian diplomacy.

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