

# Introducing the historical region of Semirechye

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Doi: 10.5077/journals/connexe.2025.e2438

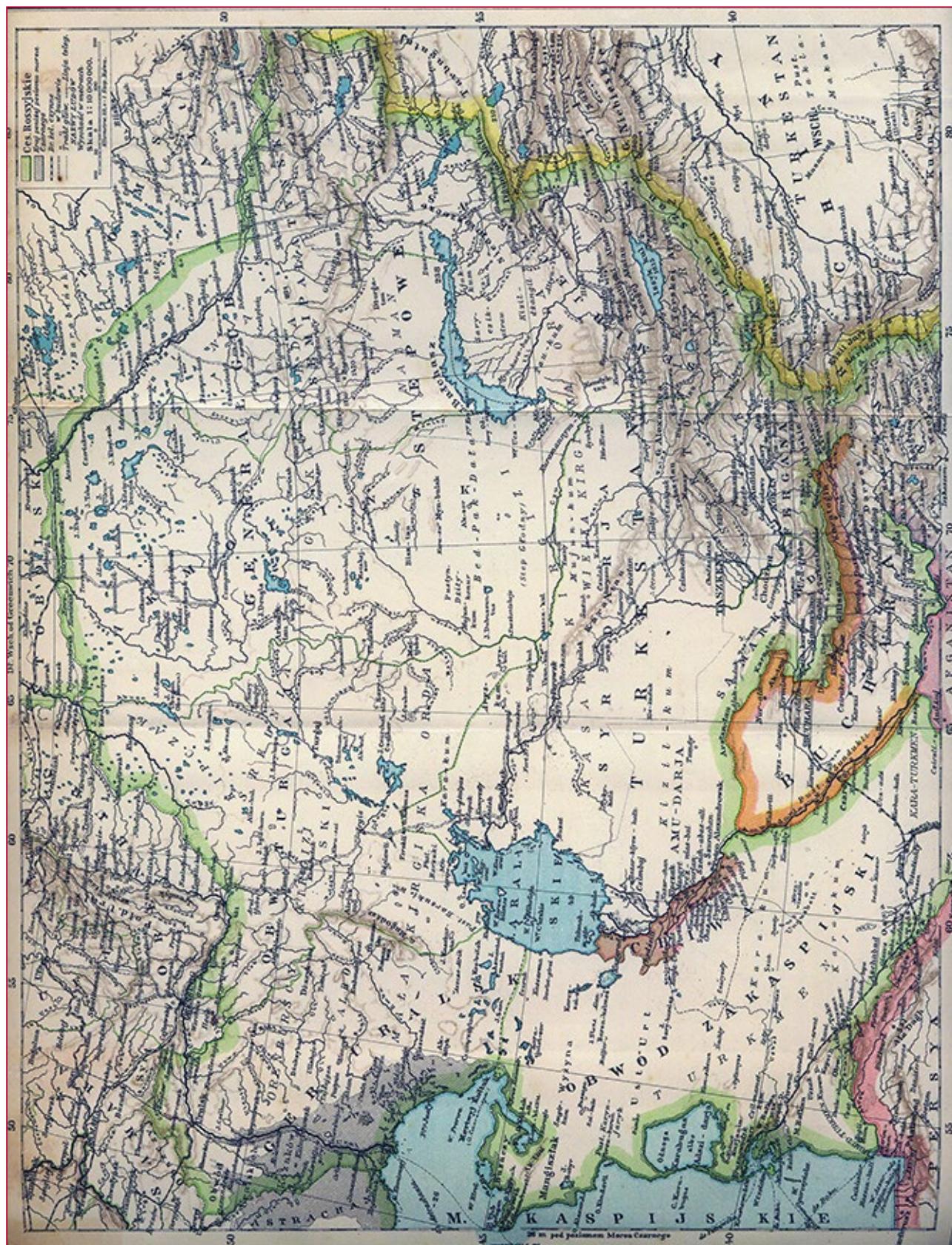
*In memory of our dear colleague Turatbek Toktobekovich Syrdybaev (1977-2025), director of the Institute of History and Area Studies, Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University*

This dossier is devoted to the historical region of Semirechye (see [Map 1](#)), which is nowadays divided between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The articles presented here originated in the international conference entitled “Semirechye in an era of global changes (mid-19th – early 20th centuries),” organised in July 2024 in Bishkek by the French Institute for Central Asian Studies (IFEAC), the Institute of History and Area Studies of the Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University and the Zhamgerchinov Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic. This conference and dossier were prepared in collaboration with our late colleague Turatbek Syrdybaev, to whom this issue is dedicated. I would also like to thank Nazira Momosheva, Associate Professor in the Department of General History at the Kyrgyz National University, for her invaluable assistance.

## Geographical considerations

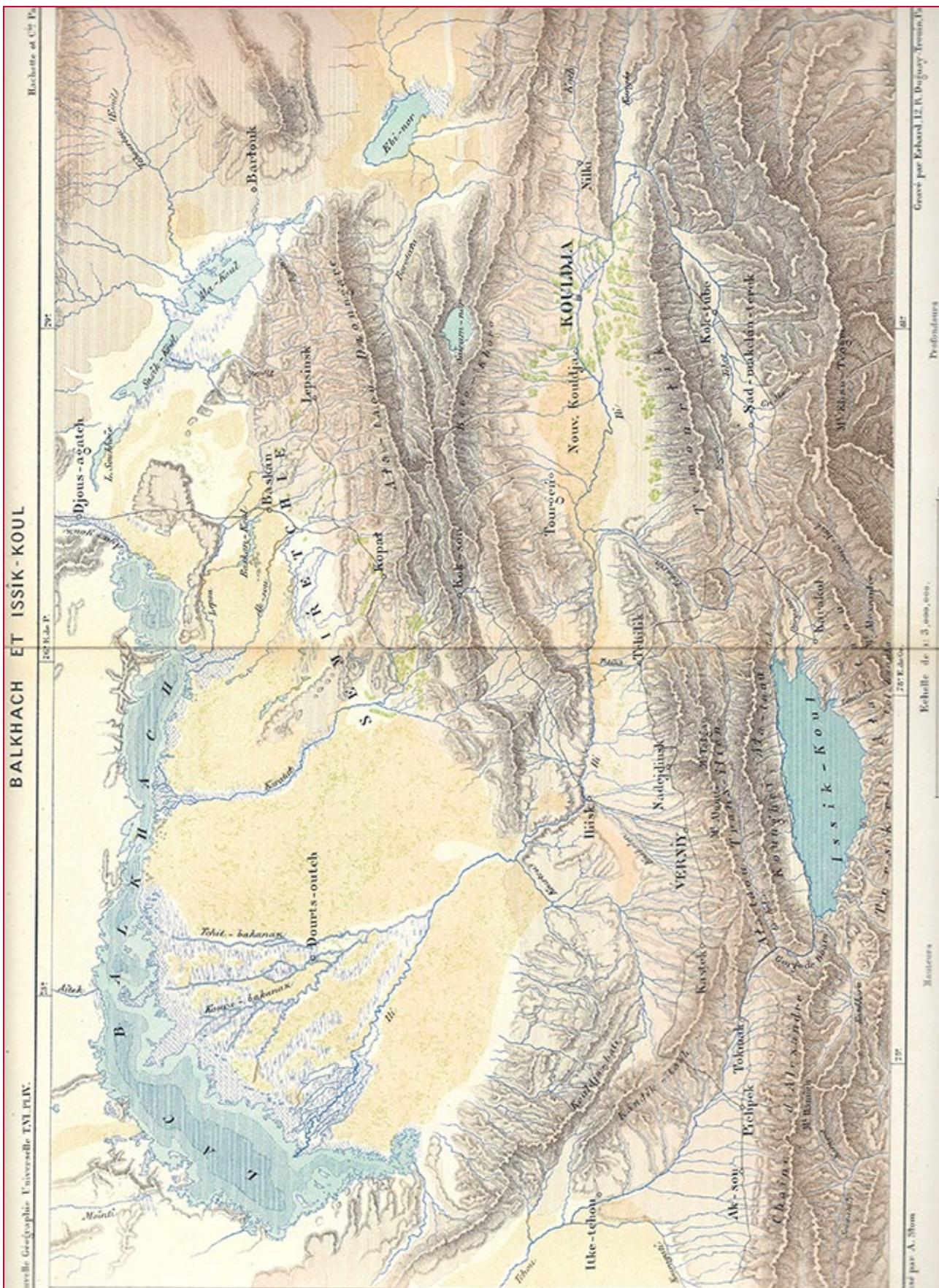
The Tsarist administrative region of [Semirechye](#) [Семиреченский область], which will be discussed in this issue, was created in 1867 within the Turkestan General-Governorship, following the Russian conquest between 1820 and 1860. The territory encompassing Semirechye extended from Lake Balkhash in the north to the Tian Shan mountains in the south. It was located on one of the main trade and migration routes between Xinjiang, China to the east and the Central Asian oases, steppes and Russia to the west (Fourniau 2000). Comparing to neighbouring regions, this area included rich pastures and a dense hydrographic network. These features made it a favourable and coveted environment for nomadic pastoralism. The first Russians to report on their exploration of the region were enthusiastic about the equally favourable conditions for agriculture. They described the fertile soil, abundant rainfall, forests and rich flora ([Map 2](#)).

The name Semirechye (the seven rivers) is the Russian translation of the Turkic toponym Zhetisu. Originally, it described an area in the north of the region and was first mentioned in sources referring to Tatar merchants who had to cross seven rivers to reach Kuldzha, the main trading town on the other side of the Chinese border. Therefore, the term didn’t refer to the entire area bordered by the future Semirechye *oblast* (region). The Russian name Semirechye began to be used around 1825. Evoking a distant and fertile territory, it became widespread in the 1840s and eventually came to designate the new oblast (Рогожинский 2021).



Map 1. Turkestan (1903)

S. Orgelbranda Encyklopedia powszechna z ilustracjami i mapami. T. 15: od litery U do Yvon,  
Warszawa : Druk. Tow. S. Orgelbranda Synów



### Map 2. Balkhash and Issik-kul (1881)

Reclus Elisée, 1881. *La nouvelle géographie universelle*, vol. VI : *L'Asie russe*  
Paris : Hachette

## Kazakhs and Kyrgyz settlement in Semirechye: A long history of conflicts

At the dawn of its integration into the Russian Empire, the Semirechye region was populated by Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, who practised nomadic pastoralism and were Muslim. However, the region's history was marked by wars, migrations and conquests. The Kazakh Khanate originated there in the 15th century subsequently expanding into the steppe and semi-arid areas to the west and north. While the Kazakhs occupied the northern part of Semirechye, the Kyrgyz settled in the more mountainous regions of the Tian Shan and around Lake Issyk-Kul.

In the 17th century, a new power appeared: the Dzungars (Western Mongols) dominated Eastern Turkestan and part of Mongolia. Their Khanate took control of Semirechye, forcing Kazakhs and Kyrgyz to move further west. Having been weakened by century-long wars with the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, the Dzungars were wiped out by Chinese forces in 1757-1758 (Map 3). The Xiyu Xinjiang region was established in 1759, ensuring China's control over the territories. Kazakhs and Kyrgyz then reoccupied the available pastures in Semirechye (Di Cosmo 2003). In Xinjiang, the Afaqis, a Sufi dynasty who had helped the Chinese defeat the Dzungars, played a leading political and religious role and constantly challenged Chinese power. Throughout the 19th century, numerous rebellions broke out among the Muslim populations, involving certain Kazakh and Kyrgyz groups. This created a porous and unstable border area for the Chinese and Russian empires (Paine 1996, 110-119).

At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the Uzbek Khanate of Kokand (Map 4), which had established itself in the Ferghana Valley, extended its power, seizing Tashkent and the southern Kazakh steppes to the west and much of Semirechye to the east (Levi 2017; Бабаджанов 2010). Meanwhile, Russian power established itself in the north of Semirechye and began its conquest of the region. Although the Chinese Empire claimed sovereignty over the region, it did not intervene militarily. Caught between these different powers, Kazakhs and Kyrgyz attempted to play them off against each other to their advantage.

## Kazakh and Kyrgyz social and political structure

The social and political structure of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz was based on a complex ancestry-linked system, the basic unit of which was the lineage [Kazakh: *py*; Kyrgyz: *ypyy*]. The lineages, often referred to as a tribe, formed political, social and economic units. There were three levels: lineage groups (collection of several lineages); lineages themselves, which were divided into multiple units of different sizes; and family lines (Jacquesson 2010, 23-24). Genealogy [Kazakh: *шежіре*; Kyrgyz: *санжыра*] was the basis of lineage unity and ensured political continuity.

The Kyrgyz lineage groups (Map 5) were divided into two main groups, the right wing [оң қанат] and the left wing [сол қанат] (Жапаров 2024). The Kyrgyz of Semirechye belonged to the right wing and were divided into four main lineage groups: the Sayak, Bugu, Sarybagysh and Solto lineage groups. The lineage elites, known as *manap* from the mid-19th century onwards, were at their head (Prior 2013). Unlike the Kazakhs, the Kyrgyz lineages did not form a khanate with a dynastic line occupying the position of khan (Akiyama 2021, 22).

The Kazakh lineage groups (Map 6) were divided into three *zhuz* [жүз] or hordes – the elder [ұлы жүз], the middle [опта жүз] and the junior [қіші жүз] – each of which occupied distinct geographical areas. Following the elimination of the Dzungars from Semirechye, the Naiman lineages of the middle *zhuz* occupied the northern part beyond Kopal, while the territory south of Kopal to the Alatau mountains came under the control of the Dulat, Zhalaiyr, Shaprashty, Alban and Suan lineage groups of the elder *zhuz* (Masanov 2014; Baigabatova 2024). Elected khans, descended from the Genghiskhanid line, headed the lineages and the *zhuz*. Their power was recognised through alliances with the lineage elites. The Kazakh khanate was structured around a hierarchy

and complex relationships between the khans, governed by primogeniture, political alliances and the prestige acquired by each of them (Ерофеева 2000). Khans' descendants, known as töre or sultans, enjoyed a special status in society and held a privileged political position. All Kazakhs owed them respect. In the 18th century, the Kazakhs of Semirechye were under the authority of Khan Ablay (1711-1781), and his sons who succeeded him in leading the various Kazakh lineages (Сатенова 2011).

### The Russian conquest of the Semirechye

As with the Kazakhs of the junior and middle *zhuz* in the 18th century, the Russian authorities negotiated the recognition of the Tsar's sovereignty with the khans and sultans of the senior *zhuz* lineages between 1819 and 1846. In 1847, the administration of the *Kirgiz*<sup>1</sup> from the Elder Horde [Пристав киргизов большой орды] was established in the newly founded Kopal fort. The Russian forces thus found themselves in direct contact with the territories under the control of the Kokand Khanate and advanced further south. The fort of Vernyi (now Almaty) was founded in 1854 at the foot of the Alatau Mountains. The Russian administration was moved there, making Vernyi the centre of Tsarist power in the region (Қойгелдиев 2004). The Kyrgyz found themselves in a complex situation, suffering attacks from the Kazakhs and facing a significant military presence, as the forces of Kokand established forts in Pishpek, Tokmak and Karakol to control the Kyrgyz territories. The ruling elites sought to defend their interests by forming alliances with both the Kokand and Russian protagonists. The Kyrgyz Bugu lineage group, inhabiting around Lake Issyk-Kul, adopted a similar strategy to that of the Kazakhs and was recognised as subjects of the Russian Empire in 1856. The administration of the *Kirgiz* from the Elder Horde was then renamed the Alatau district, incorporating the Bugu. In 1860, Kokand and Russia engaged in a major confrontation for control of Semirechye. The Battle of Uzun-Agach resulted in a Russian victory, prompting the Kyrgyz lineage elites of the Sarybagysh, Solto and Sayak groups to submit to Tsarist rule in subsequent years (Morrison 2020, 198-203; Недзвецкий 1910).

After defeating the Kokand Khanate and forcing the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz to rally to their cause, the question of the border with the Qing Empire remained to be resolved. Plagued by Muslim revolts in Xinjiang, China was weakened and forced to recognise Russian sovereignty over Semirechye. The Treaty of Chuguchak in 1864 confirmed the Russian conquest (Paine 1996, 90-91) (Map 7).

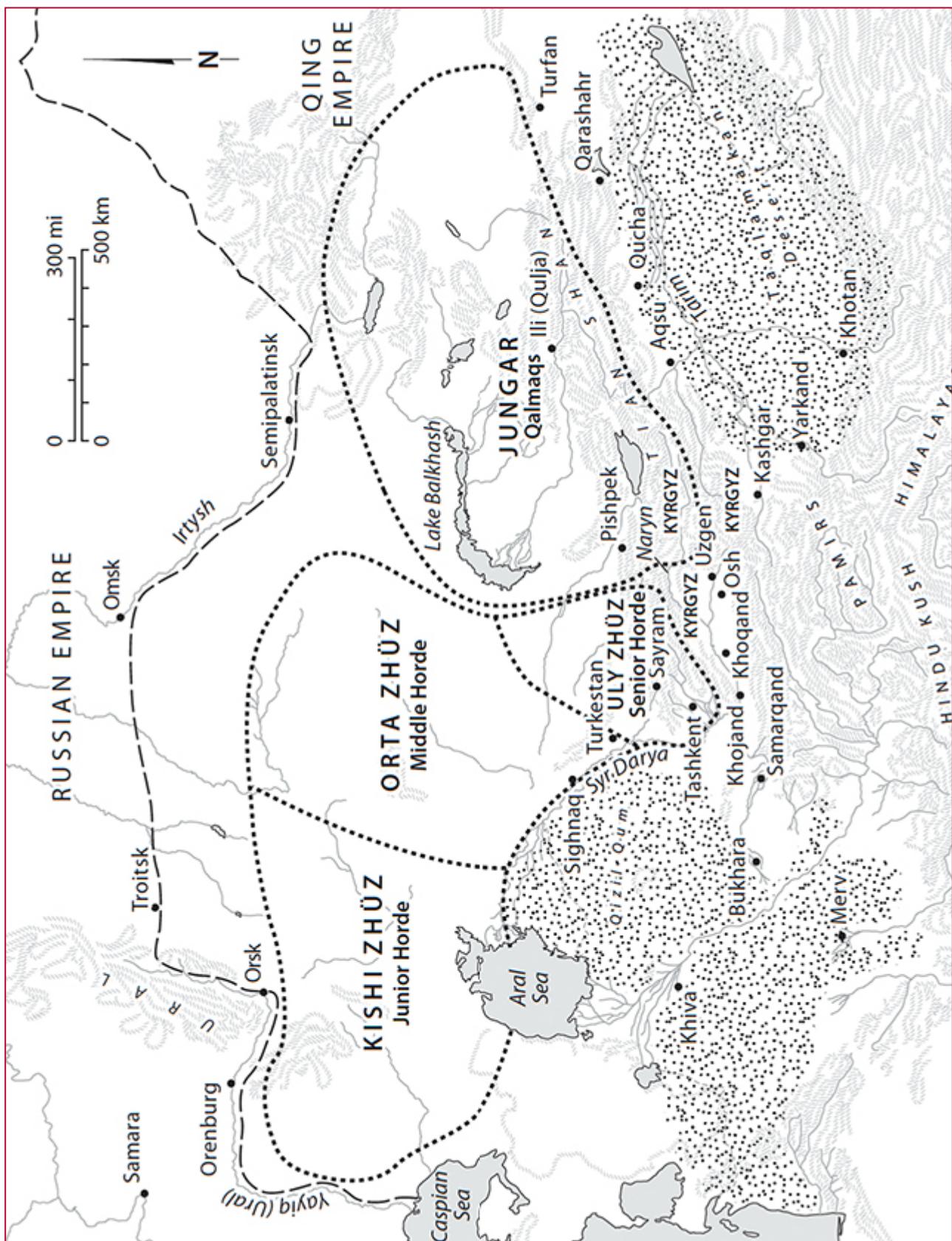
Following their integration into the Russian Empire, the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz were subjected to the Statute of 1822, enacted by Mikhail Speransky (1772-1839), which created a new social estate for the "allogenous" populations [инородцы]. This special category of subjects of the Russian Empire was in force until 1917 and was intended for the non-European populations of Siberia and Central Asia. Subject to taxes and duties, the allogenous were exempt from military service and benefited from their own local administration (Иванова 2004, 191-216).

From the 18th century until 1925, the ethnic name *Kirgiz* [киргиз], which is the russification of the term Kyrgyz [кыргыз], was given in the Russian sources to the Kazakhs. Based on a 18th-century Dutch atlas that mentioned the Yenisei Kyrgyz,<sup>2</sup> it was deduced that the Kazakhs were the descendants of the Kyrgyz with whom they effectively share the nomadic lifestyle and Turkic identity (Ерофеева 2005). To some extent, the term could also include the Kyrgyz, who were more often referred to as mountainous *Kirgiz* [дикокаменные киргизы] or *kara-Kirgiz* [кара-киргиз] to distinguish them from the Kazakhs.

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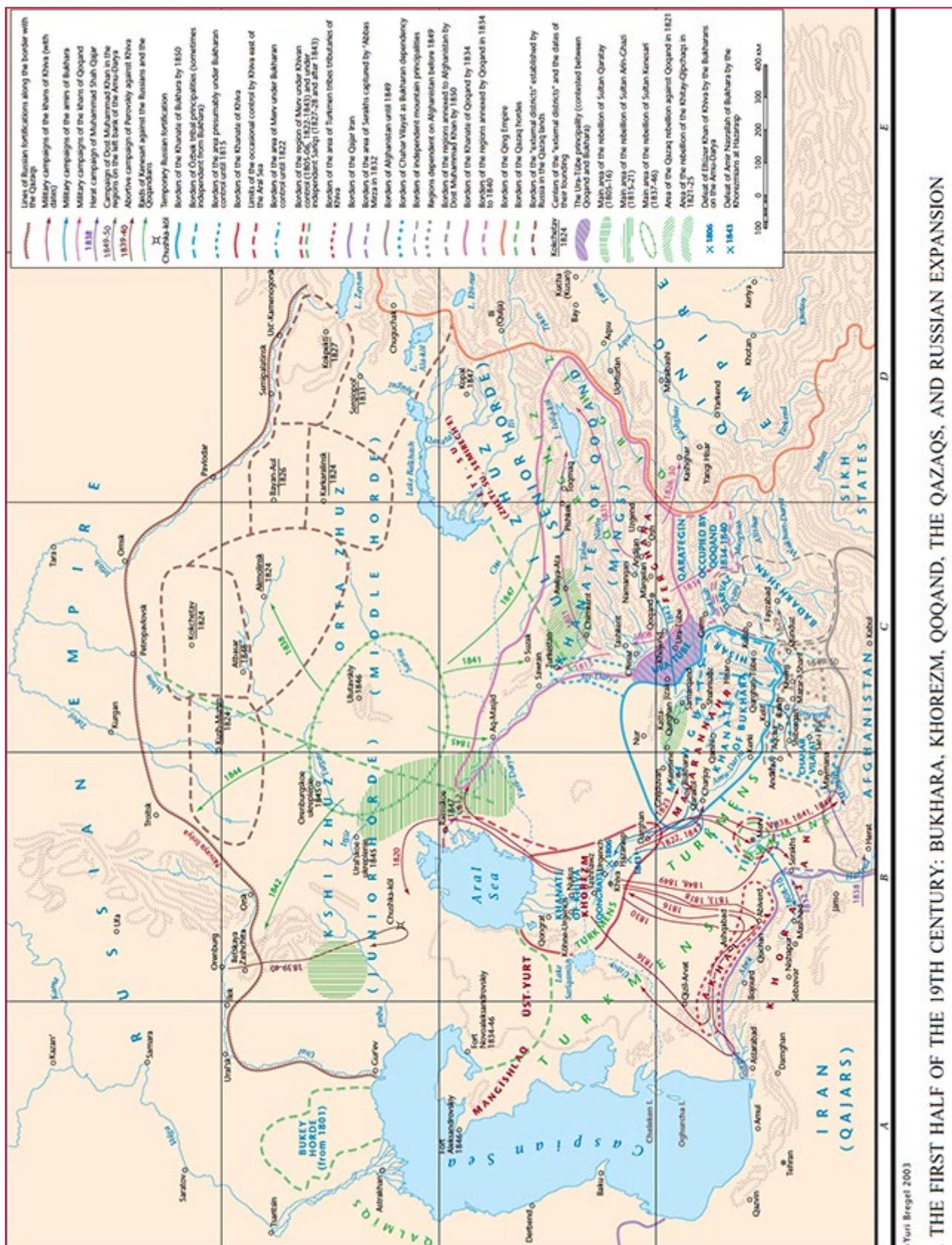
<sup>1</sup> The use of the term *Kirgiz* corresponds to the usage in Russian sources to refer primarily to Kazakhs, with whom the Kyrgyz may possibly be associated.

<sup>2</sup> The Yenisei Kyrgyz are considered as one of the most ancient Turkic people, their first mention dating from the end of the third century BCE. During the first millennium AD, they dwelled along the upper Yenisei River, and the heart of their homeland was the modern-day Tuva, just north of Mongolia. A Kyrgyz khaganate was founded in the seventh century which dominated Southern Siberia and the Mongolian plateau from 840 to 925 (Golden 2011, 46-48; Drompp 2002).



Map 3. Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and the Dzungar [Jungar] khanate, 17-18th centuries

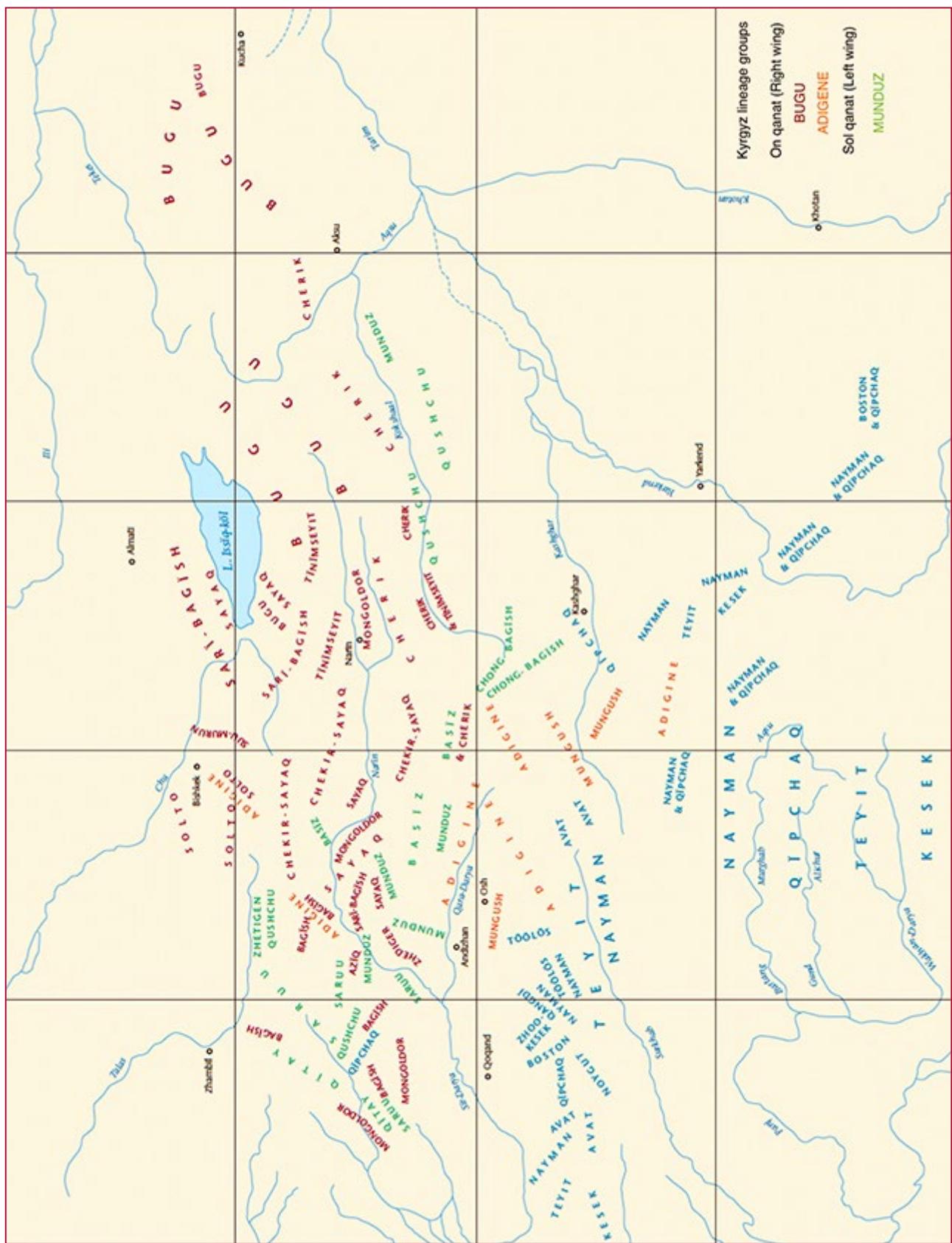
Bill Nelson, Levi Scott, 2017. *The rise and fall of Khoqand, 1709-1876*,  
Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 26



. THE FIRST HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY: BUKHARA, KHOREZM, QOQAND, THE QAZAQS, AND RUSSIAN EXPANSION

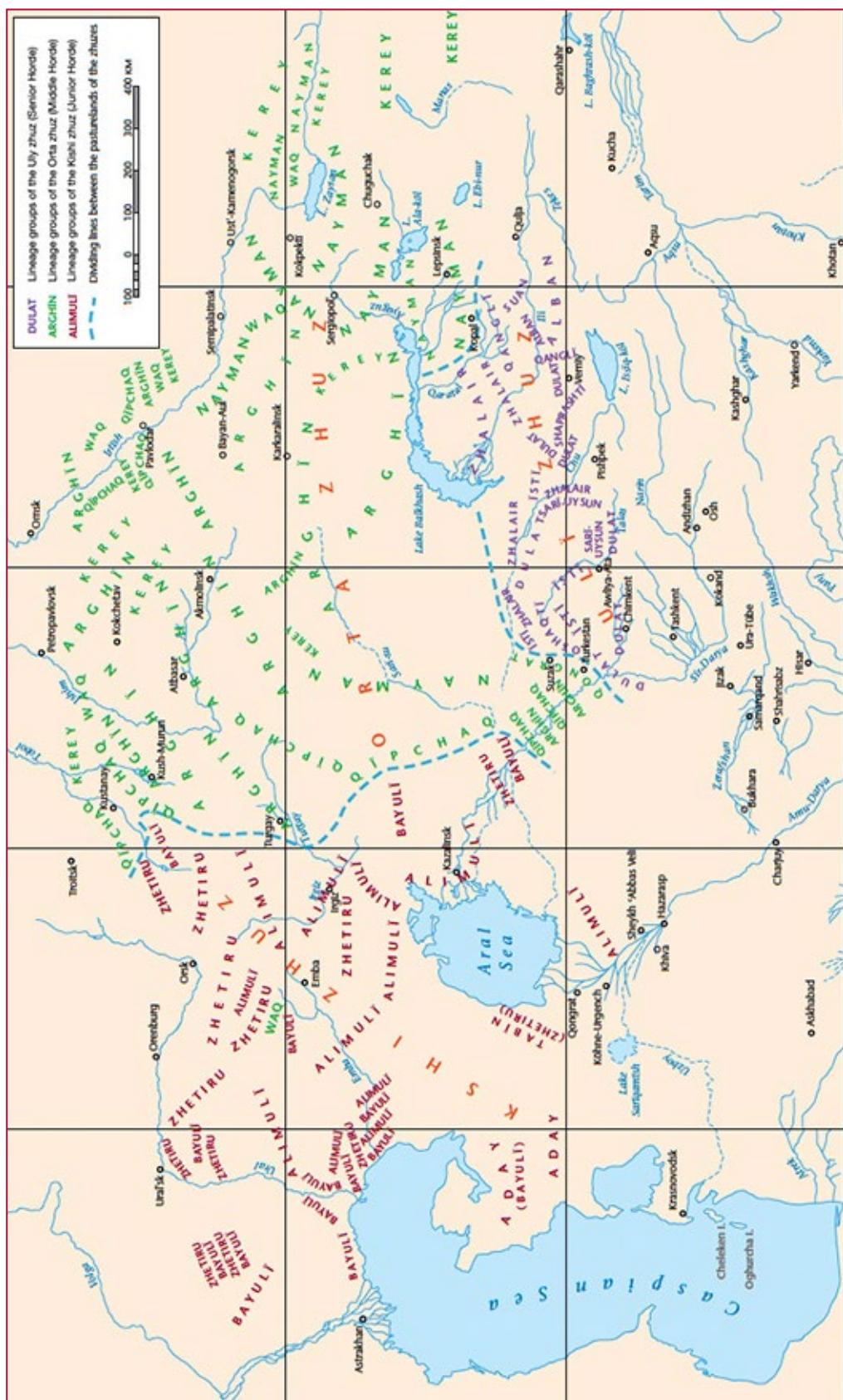
Map 4. The first half of the 19th century: Bukhara, Khorezm, Qoqand [Kokand], the Qazaqs, and Russian expansion

Bregel Yuri, 2003. *An historical atlas of Central Asia*  
Leiden/Boston: Brill, 63



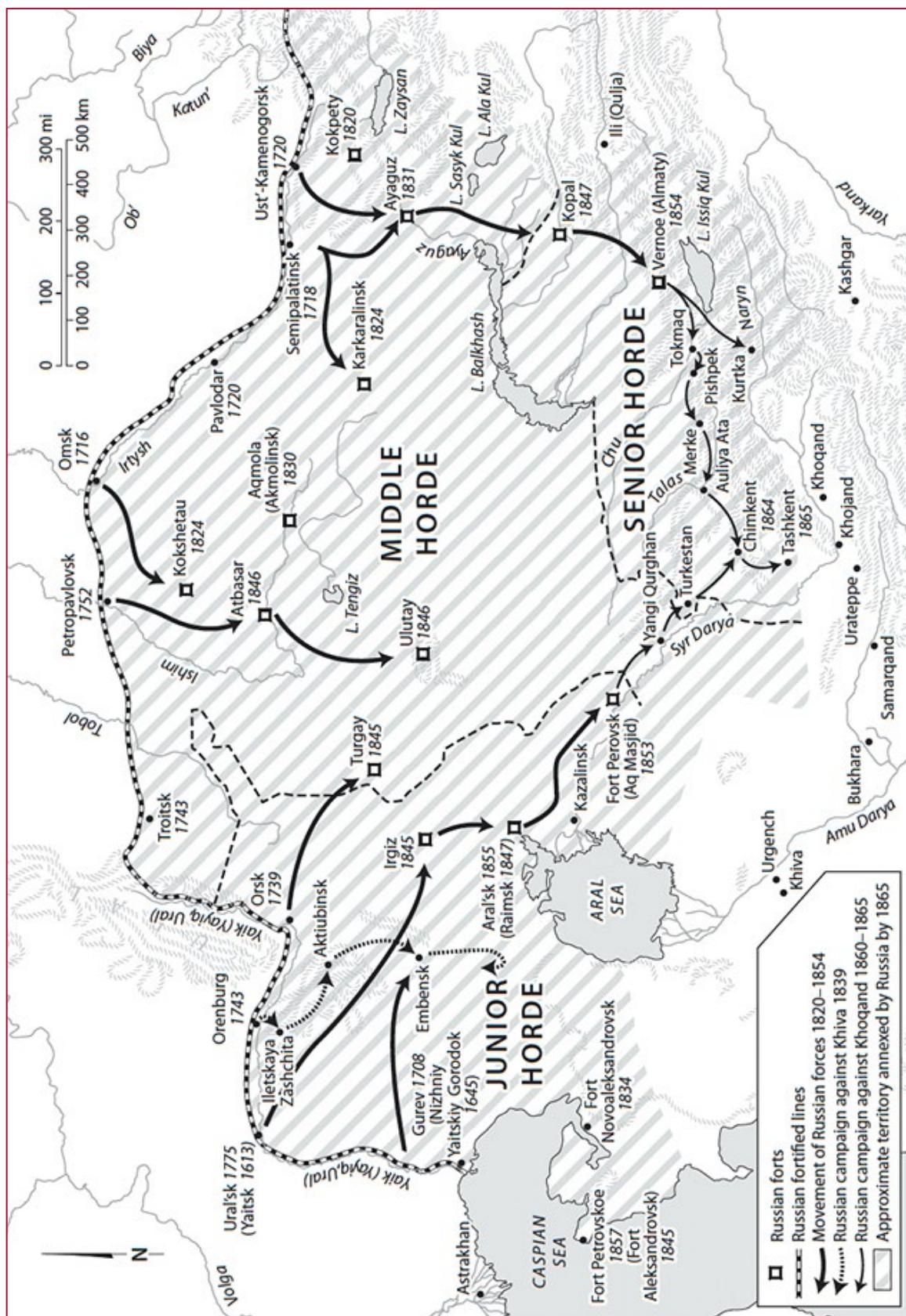
### Map 5. Kyrgyz lineage groups

Bregel Yuri, 2003. *An historical atlas of Central Asia*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 79



Map 6. Kazakh lineage groups

Bregel Yuri, 2003. *An historical atlas of Central Asia*  
Leiden/Boston: Brill, 77



Map 7. Russian conquest of Central Asia

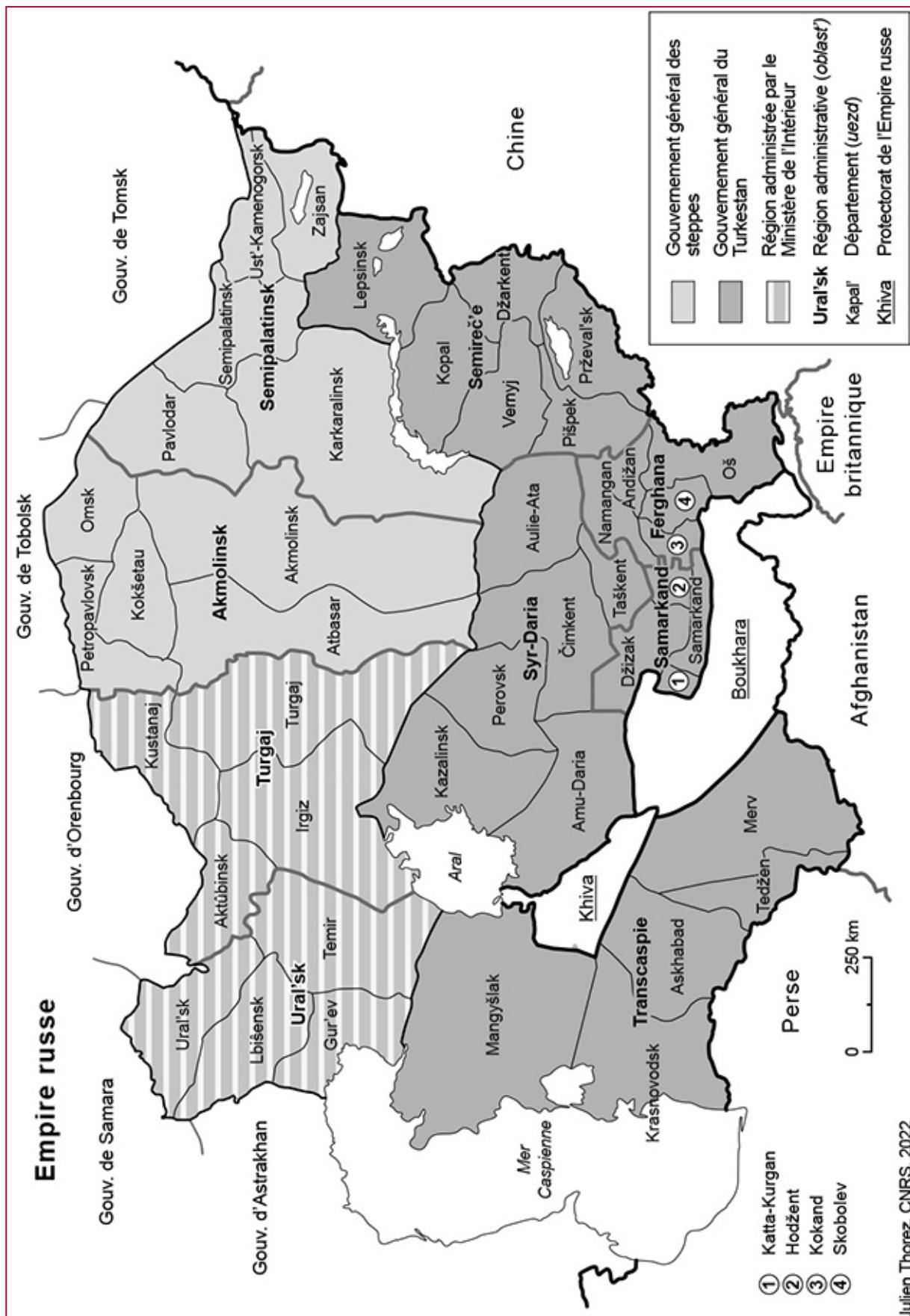
Bill Nelson, Levi Scott, 2017. *The rise and fall of Khoqand, 1709–1876*,  
Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 180

## The establishment of the Semirechye oblast and its colonial nature

The promulgation of the Regulation on the Turkestan General-Governorship in 1867 established a colonial regime that aimed to reshape Central Asian societies while securing the new territories for the Empire (Brower 2003, 35-43). A vast programme of social engineering was then set in motion and met with resistance and various forms of adaptation by the local populations. Several competing and intersecting forms of legitimacy questioned the place of religion, the formation of a community/people, and the idea of the state. The entire colonial period was also characterised by frequent administrative division changes and significant population mobility ([Map 8](#)).

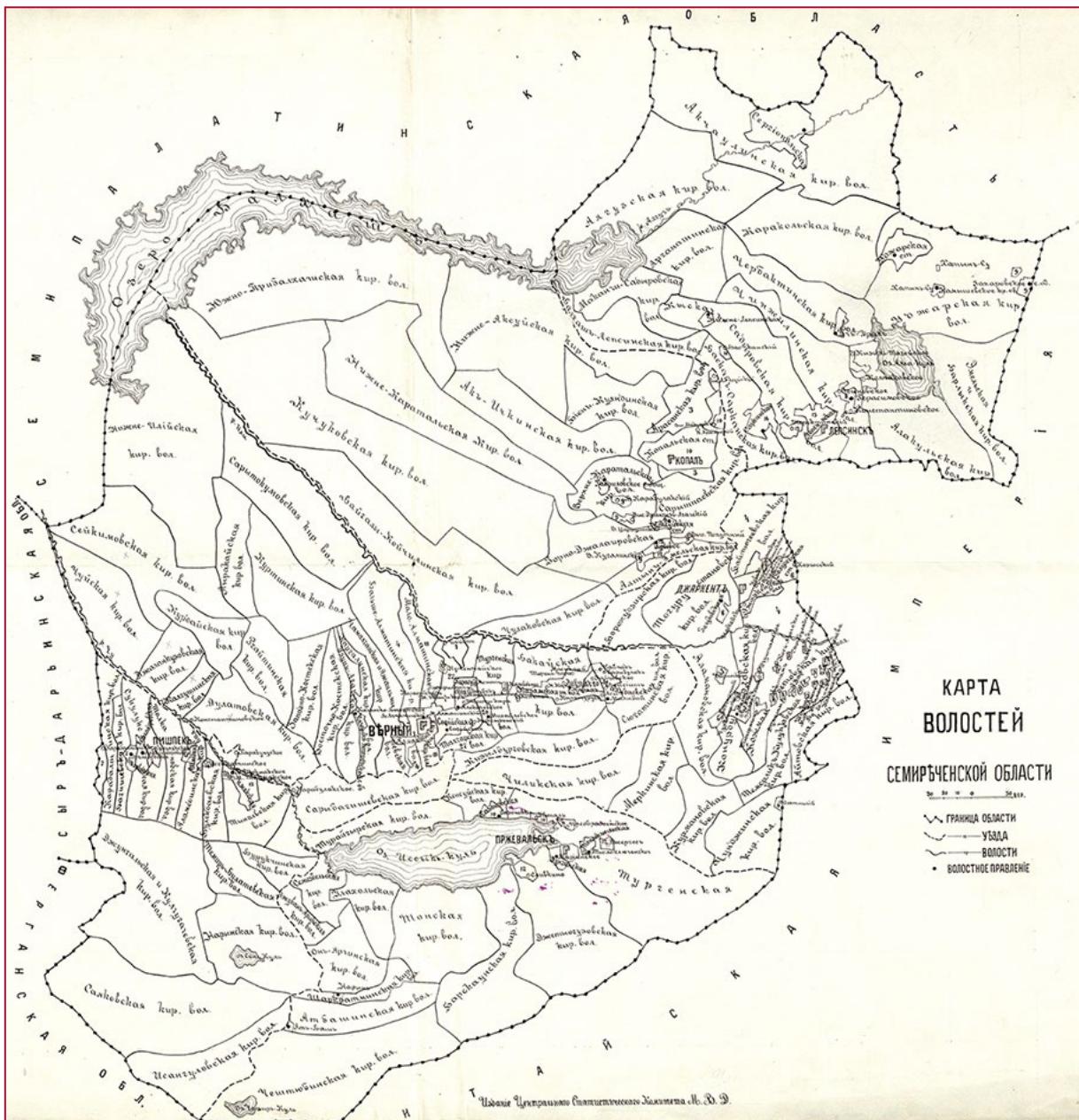
When the Semirechye oblast was created replacing the Alatau District, the Russian authorities introduced a new administrative structure comprising administrative *aul* (encampments) of 50-70 families; *volosts* (districts) of 10-12 administrative *aul*, and *uezds* (departments). The Semirechye oblast consisted of six *uezds*: Vernyi, Kopal, Sergipolskii (Lepsinsk from 1893), Tokmak (Pishpek from 1891) and Karakol (Przhevalsk from 1889). Dzharkent was added to this list in 1882. Within the *uezds*, the different categories of population, Russian peasants, Cossack and *Kirgiz*, were grouped into separate *volosts*. While Kazakhs or Kyrgyz were elected to lead the *Kirgiz* *volosts*, the head of the *uezd* was a Russian officer, to whom the *volost* administrators reported. When Dungans (Chinese Muslims) and Uyghurs moved to the Semirechye in the 1870s and 1880s, specific *volost* were created for them.

An administrative centre was established in each *uezd*, forming a new urban network in the region. The forts established by the Cossacks – Sergipolskii (1846), Kopal (1848), Vernyi (1854), Pishpek (1864), Tokmak (1864), Karakol (1865) were gradually granted city status, attracting new populations from Russia: Russian civil servants, entrepreneurs, workers and craftsmen; Tatar merchants, mullahs and teachers, etc. Tatar merchants had been using the trade route to China for decades and they took advantage of the opportunities offered by the creation of the Semirechye oblast to settle there. A new colonial society has emerged, adopting many features from the capital of Turkestan (Sahadeo 2010), while distinguishing itself by its specific relationships with the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, who, unlike the Uzbeks, did not have urban culture ([Map 9](#)).



**Map 8. Administrative divisions of Russian Central Asia in 1900**

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**Map 9. Map of the volost of the Semirechye oblast at the end of 19th century**

Тройницкий Николай (ред.), 1895. *Волости и населенные места 1893 года. Вып. 7: Семиреченская область* [Volost and inhabited localities in 1893. Issue 7: Semirechye oblast], Санкт-Петербург : Издание Центрального статистического комитета МВД, 65.

## Articles and Stop on Archives

The dossier comprises four articles and two “Stop on Archives,” that address issues relating to the colonial history of Semirechye between 1867 and 1917. The main approach was to demonstrate the agency of Central Asians in the face of Russia’s modernisation project. While the Tsarist regime sought to reconfigure the region according to the interests of the metropolis and the Russian settlers and entrepreneurs, Central Asian societies demonstrated significant dynamism in developing strategies to resist colonial control. Interactions between Russian administrations and policies and the Central Asian populations are therefore a recurring theme. The transnational character was also emphasised, so as not to confine the studies to solely Kyrgyzstan or Kazakhstan. The aim is not to overlook the links that exist within the historical Semirechye region itself and with the adjacent territories, Xinjiang and Uzbekistan.

The first article in this dossier, entitled “**On the eve of major administrative reforms in Russian Central Asia: The 1867 Moscow ethnographic exhibition, a reflection of what was at stake for local tsarist colonial administrations and Central Asian elites**,” focuses on the pivotal period of 1865-1867, just prior to the creation of the Turkestan General-Governorship. In his article, **Xavier Hallez** (associated researcher at IFEAC and CETOBAC) considers the relationship between Central Asian elites and regional tsarist administrations in the context of the construction of a colonial vision of Central Asia concomitant with the administrative restructuring of the region. The Russian ethnographic exhibition opened at the same time as the Paris World’s Fair, and these two events conveyed an image of the region through artefacts collected mainly by Central Asian mediators. These representations of the peoples of the Russian Empire were part of a global enterprise of modernisation based on knowledge, and the article discusses the forms of agency of Central Asians in this process.

The second article, entitled “**All-Russian and Turkestani Exhibitions as a reflection of the Russian colonisation in Central Asia: The case of Semirechye in the 2nd half of the 19th century**,” continues this same theme throughout the colonial period. **Askarbek Bedelbaev, Taalaikul Asanturova, Zamira Orozahunova and Manzura Satimkulova** (Institute of History and Regional Studies, Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University) demonstrate the considerable human and financial resources that were mobilised to organise exhibitions in Turkestan and Russia from the 1870s onwards. The main motivation was to promote Turkestan’s potential in order to justify the investments necessary for its administration and modernisation. Semirechye was therefore primarily represented by its products, with Russian entrepreneurs always being highlighted. The image of the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz remained associated with the nomadic way of life, focusing on exotic themes such as mobility, horses, yurts, and eagle hunting. As Russian knowledge of Turkestan developed, Central Asians gradually became marginalised and the colonial view of indigenous societies and cultures was reinforced. The exhibitions were also designed to introduce the Russian population to the newly conquered territories thereby strengthening the unity of the Empire. This task was partly accomplished in the sense that Turkestan began to exist in the Russian imagination.

The article, titled “**Transnational politicisation of local elites in Semirechye: The first Muslim congress of the Semirechye region (1906) and the Uzun-Agach congress (1910)**,” explores the development of political and national demands among Central Asians in a colonial context. **Aida Kubatova** (Senior Researcher at the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of the Kyrgyz Republic) describes the formation of networks and the organisation of congresses and informal gatherings between 1905 and 1912. The 1905 revolution allowed for the expression of political discourse and paved the way for the brief representation of Semirechye allogenous population in the new State Duma. Muslim reformism, known as Jadidism, played a pivotal role in the politicisation of Semirechye, significantly impacted by the All-Russian

Muslim movement. The freedom of religion had many implications. The Kazakh and Kyrgyz elites mobilised alongside Tatars and Uyghurs in a transnational dynamic.

In the last article, “**The policy of the Russian Empire toward cross-border migration from Semirechye to China (1900-1910)**,” **Svetlana Asanova** (Associate Professor at the Branch of the Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia in Tashkent) analyses the mobility of Central Asians – Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Dungans, and Uyghurs, between the Chinese and Russian empires. Migration to the Russian Empire has been the subject of numerous studies, but this has been less the case for the movements of Russian subjects to Xinjiang, which is the focus of this article. The Tsarist government took a series of measures to control these movements and introduced specific legislations. These movements were not merely a matter of economic migration or political escape but also represented a form of implicit political response to imperial policies. The experience of Semirechye in the early 20th century thus allows us to understand migration and protest not as isolated phenomena but as interconnected manifestations of postcolonial tension that continued to shape regional identities well into the post-imperial period.

The two “**Stop on Archives**” complement these articles by offering two perspectives respectively on the tools used by the Russian authorities to assert their authority over Semirechye and on colonial Central Asian society in Semirechye. **Asel Daniyarova** (Director of Sanjarbek Daniyarov Foundation) presents the fate of a Kazakh teacher in her paper “**Khafiz Sarsekeev, the forgotten co-author of the first Kyrgyz printed book ABC for high-speed learning to read (1911)**,” which echoes Aida Kubatova’s article. His biography shows the key role of Tatar educational institutions in the formation of Central Asian intellectual and political networks, and the influence of Jadidism. The paper also explores his connections with Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Tatar intellectual circles that spanned the end of the Tsarist period, the revolutions of 1917 and the beginning of the Soviet era.

**Jeenbek Alymbaev** and **Gulnaz Askarbek** (Manas Kyrgyz-Turkish University) explore the “**Coats of arms of the Semirechye region’s towns as a historical source**.” The predominant way of life in the Semirechye oblast was nomadic pastoralism, but no reference is made to this. Conversely, several elements recall agriculture, such as ploughs, wheat and vine leaves. The coats of arms adopted for the cities of the Semirechye oblast express a colonial vision of Turkestan and serve to mark Russian power in the region. This paper illustrates the considerations made by Askarbek Bedelbaev, Taalaikul Asanturova, Zamira Orozahunova and Manzura Satimkulova in their article on the representation of Semirechye in Turkestan and Russian exhibitions.

These contributions shed new light on several dynamics that have permeated the entire history of colonial Semirechye. The two main themes explored in this dossier are firstly the relationship between colonial domination, modernisation and the construction of knowledge, and secondly mobility. The authors show the diversity of Central Asian agency and the close connections between the various active social circles. The transnational element was deliberately emphasised, without obliterating the existing national or ethnic differences that would gradually assert themselves politically. In the 1920s, the Kazakhs and Kyrgyz established their own Soviet republics, thus dividing Semirechye between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

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