

FROM SOURCES TO INTERPRETATION: WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY ON THE 1873 RUSSIAN CONQUEST OF THE KHANATE OF KHIVA

No‘monov Kamronbek Kozimjon o‘g‘li

Student of the Tashkent Kimyo International University of Namangan Branch

kamronbeknomonov76@gmail.com, +998 91 054 14 06

Abstract

This article examines the 1873 conquest of the Khanate of Khiva by the Russian Empire and how this event was interpreted by Western historians of the 19th and early 20th centuries. It analyzes and compares the views of key foreign observers such as Henry Lansdell, Warren Walsh, Francis Skrine, and Januarius Aloysius MacGahan. Special attention is paid to the geopolitical causes, military operations, and the diplomatic maneuvers surrounding the conquest, as well as its broader historical implications. MacGahan’s eyewitness accounts, as documented in his works, serve as particularly valuable sources for reconstructing the events. The article adopts historical-comparative, source-critical, and contextual analytical methods.

Keywords: Khanate of Khiva, Russian Empire, colonialism, Western historiography, MacGahan, military expedition, 19th century.

Introduction

In the second half of the 19th century, the Russian Empire initiated an aggressive expansionist policy toward the independent states of Central Asia — namely, the Khanates of Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand — in order to broaden its political and economic interests in the region. As a result of this policy, in 1873, the Khanate of Khiva was subjected to a military invasion by Russia and consequently lost its sovereignty. The conquest of Khiva represented a significant turning point not only in the history of the Uzbek people but also in the broader history of Central Asia. This event marked one of the final stages of Russian colonization in the region and has been recognized as an important subject in Western historiography.

During the Russian invasion of Khiva, a number of Western historians, war correspondents, and travelers documented and analyzed the unfolding events in their writings. Many of them sought to justify the Russian conquest by referring to strategic and economic considerations, as well as to the necessity of protecting Russian citizens. For example, the British scholar Henry Lansdell, in his book *Russian Central Asia, including Kuldja, Khiva and Merv*, explains the conquest in terms of hostage-taking of Russian citizens, attacks on caravans, banditry, and local uprisings. According to him, the Russian Empire acted to restore order and defend its people — though the underlying geopolitical and economic interests remained largely unstated.



A particularly important role in documenting the conquest of Khiva was played by the American journalist Januarius Aloysius MacGahan, who participated in the 1873 military campaign as part of the Russian army. He was present in Khiva and later published *Campaigning on the Oxus and the Fall of Khiva*. In this work, MacGahan provides detailed accounts of the internal political situation in the Khanate, the movements of the Russian army, the sentiments of the local population, and the consequences of the invasion. He also provides valuable information on the internal divisions within the khanate, the disputes among officials, and the khan's attempts to seek foreign assistance. Of particular historical significance are his records of negotiations between General Kaufman and Muhammad Rahim Khan II, the ruler of Khiva.

This article is dedicated to analyzing this historical event — the Russian conquest of the Khanate of Khiva — and how it has been represented in Western historical literature. The primary focus is on the views of Western scholars such as Henry Lansdell, Warren Walsh, Francis Skrine, and Januarius Aloysius MacGahan, writing at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. These authors evaluated Russia's actions from different perspectives: while some viewed the campaign as a “civilizing mission,” others described it more frankly as colonial aggression. By examining these varying perspectives, we can better understand the geopolitical conditions surrounding the conquest, the military and diplomatic means employed, and how Western authors interpreted the event. In this way, the conquest of Khiva proves significant not only for regional history but also for the study of international relations, military strategy, and the history of imperialism.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

Although a number of studies in Western historiography have addressed the conquest of the Khanate of Khiva by the Russian Empire, each work is shaped by different methodological approaches and reflects the political climate and ideological outlook of its time. Scholars writing in the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century adopted a range of perspectives in interpreting these events — at times seeking to justify colonial policy, and at others offering more critical analyses.

The British scholar Henry Lansdell, in his influential work *Russian Central Asia*, including *Kuldja, Khiva and Merv*, provides a detailed account of Russia's military campaigns in the region. Regarding the causes of the conquest of Khiva, he asserts: “Khivan banditry, the collection of taxes from Russia, incitement of the Kazakhs to rebellion, and the detention of Russian captives — all these served as justification for the Russian military campaign” [1]. Lansdell's argument reflects a perspective that legitimizes and even rationalizes Russian actions, presenting them as necessary and defensive. However, such a viewpoint often serves to obscure the underlying colonial motives behind the campaign.

Warren Walsh, in his book *The Expansion into Central Asia*, seeks to explain Russia's penetration into Turkestan through economic, defensive, and cultural arguments. He compares Russia's movements with the colonial campaigns of Western powers and emphasizes that the Russians were engaged not in a pursuit of “glory or wealth,” but rather in “plain expansion”



[2]. While Walsh's view reflects the geopolitical realities of his time, from a modern historical perspective, it fails to fully address the coercive and imperial nature of Russia's actions.

The writings of the American war correspondent Januarius Aloysius MacGahan, particularly his *The Fall of Khiva*, represent one of the most valuable primary sources for understanding the conquest. Accompanying the Russian army during its campaign, MacGahan observed events firsthand and provided vivid descriptions of what he witnessed. He notes that the Russian army attacked Khiva along three routes and captured the fortress of Khazarasp on May 24, 1873, without firing a single shot — a fact he attributes to internal political divisions and administrative disarray within the Khanate [3]. MacGahan's work is indispensable for studying historical details, diplomatic negotiations, and the domestic situation of Khiva during this period.

Methodologically, this article is grounded in historical-comparative and source-critical approaches. The comparative method enables an assessment of the Russian Empire's policies toward Khiva in the broader context of colonial actions by other Western powers. Meanwhile, the source-critical method is used to distinguish between factual historical content and the subjective interpretations found in the writings of the aforementioned researchers, thereby striving to reconstruct an accurate picture of the events.

Additionally, through the use of historical reconstruction, the article chronologically analyzes the military operations, diplomatic relations, and internal political climate of the Khanate of Khiva during the 1873 conquest. This approach provides a structured and evidence-based framework for understanding the course of events.

Furthermore, Western historiographical sources that describe Russian activities in Turkestan are analyzed within their broader geopolitical and ideological contexts. For instance, in *The Heart of Asia* by Skrine and Denison Ross, the events surrounding the conquest of Khiva are briefly mentioned, focusing primarily on the hardships faced by Russian expeditions — such as shortages of food and water — while largely emphasizing Russian victories [4]. Such accounts contributed to a biased representation of history by downplaying the effects on local populations and ignoring the violence and disruptions caused by colonial invasion.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The 1873 conquest of the Khanate of Khiva by the Russian Empire was a decisive event in the history of Central Asia. This military and political incursion not only altered the regional balance of power, but also ushered in fundamental changes to local governance, socio-economic structures, and international relations. Western historians have examined the event from a variety of perspectives. A thorough analysis of their interpretations reveals that Russia's invasion was not only a military endeavor but also served as an ideological and propagandistic enterprise.

This analysis reveals that many Western scholars did not fully recognize Russia's actions in Central Asia as part of a broader colonial agenda. For example, Henry Lansdell viewed the Russian campaign in Khiva as a necessary act, driven by the capture of Russian citizens, attacks on trade caravans, and local uprisings [1]. This approach reflects the "civilizing mission"



narrative that served to morally justify imperial expansion. However, such a position contradicts the sovereignty of the Khanate and the right of its people to self-determination.

Warren Walsh provides a more comprehensive framework, attributing Russia's advance into Central Asia to economic, strategic, and ideological motives. He compares the Russian colonial endeavor with British imperialism in India and French colonialism in North Africa, arguing that Russia's activities were part of a "natural" process of expansion [2]. From a historical perspective, however, this interpretation presents a one-sided view that favors imperial interests while ignoring the consequences for the colonized.

Importantly, the internal instability of the Khanate at the time of the invasion contributed significantly to the Russian victory. The American journalist MacGahan, in his account, notes internal rivalries between figures such as Sayyid Amir-ul-Umara, Matniyoz Dewanbegi, and Matmurod Dewanbegi, which undermined the defense of the Khanate [3]. Due to this political disunity and the absence of a coherent strategy, Russian troops were able to capture the fortress of Hazorasp without resistance and then advance into Khiva. This lack of organized resistance provided a significant tactical advantage to the Russian military.

Further analysis reveals that the Khanate of Khiva attempted to preserve its independence by seeking international assistance. Muhammad Rahim Khan II sent envoys to Great Britain and Afghanistan requesting help. However, Britain was slow to respond, and its diplomatic reply, although supportive in language, did not translate into meaningful action. A letter from London expressed support for a Muslim alliance against Russian aggression, but no such coalition materialized [3]. This illustrates how the Russian Empire exploited not only internal weaknesses but also the passivity of international actors in carrying out its military campaign. A review of Western historiographical sources also indicates that many authors focused on military strategy and imperial interests while largely neglecting the social, cultural, and political dimensions of Khivan society. For instance, Skrine and Denison Ross, in *The Heart of Asia*, provide a brief and superficial overview of the conquest, focusing on Russian hardships such as food and water shortages while portraying Russian soldiers as heroic figures [4]. Little attention is given to the fate of the local population or to the impact of the invasion on Khiva's social order. This reflects a broader indifference or ideological bias prevalent in Western colonial scholarship.

In conclusion, the conquest of the Khanate of Khiva is presented differently in various historical sources. Western authors often interpret the event from the Russian point of view, framing the invasion as a "civilizing mission" or as a defensive necessity. Yet the works of independent observers like MacGahan offer a more balanced account, shedding light on the internal political divisions of the Khanate, the psychological state of its population, and the real consequences of Russian political and military dominance.

Drawing from this analysis, it is clear that the conquest was not merely a military operation, but rather a long-planned and strategically executed act of imperial expansion. It was supported by years of preparation, diplomatic manipulation, and forceful execution. The conquest not only ended Khiva's sovereignty but also reshaped the political landscape of the region and laid the foundation for broader Russian colonial rule across Turkestan. Thus, the fall of Khiva



remains a significant historical event that continues to demand scholarly attention in discussions of imperialism, international politics, and the historical geography of Central Asia.

CONCLUSION

The 1873 conquest of the Khanate of Khiva by the Russian Empire was one of the most significant political events in the history of Central Asia. It had a direct impact on the region's subsequent development and political structure. This military campaign has also been interpreted in various ways by Western historians: while some researchers viewed it as an effort by Russia to ensure security and order, others considered it a clear manifestation of imperialist ambitions. Scholars such as Henry Lansdell, Warren Walsh, Skrine, and Ross attempted to justify Russia's actions by framing the conquest as part of a civilizing mission or as a geopolitical necessity. However, the eyewitness accounts of the American journalist MacGahan provide a more realistic and impartial portrayal of the invasion and its consequences.

MacGahan's reports demonstrate that the internal political instability of the Khanate, rivalries among officials, the failure to obtain timely external support, and Russia's military readiness all created favorable conditions for the conquest. The Khanate's diplomatic efforts — particularly Muhammad Rahim Khan II's appeals to Britain and Afghanistan — failed to alter the geopolitical balance, as international responses were slow and ultimately ineffective.

As a result, the Khanate of Khiva lost its independence and was forced to sign the Treaty of Gandymyan, placing it under Russian control. This marked a decisive phase in Russia's establishment of political dominance over the entire Turkestan region. The conquest of Khiva serves as a historical lesson, underscoring the critical importance of internal unity and proactive foreign diplomacy for the survival of independent states.

REFERENCES

1. Lansdell, H. (1885). *Russian Central Asia*. London: R. Bentley & Son.
2. Walsh, W. (1905). *The Expansion into Central Asia*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
3. MacGahan, J. A. (1874). *The Fall of Khiva*. London: Sampson Low, Marston, Low, and Searle.
4. Skrine, F. H., & Ross, E. D. (1899). *The Heart of Asia: A History of Russian Turkestan and the Central Asian Khanates from the Earliest Times*. London: Methuen & Co.
5. Usmona, F. M. q. (2023). The Russian Conquest of the Khanate of Khiva in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century Western Historiography. In *Theory and Analytical Aspects of Recent Research: International Scientific-Online Conference (Part 18, pp. 91–95)*. Interonconf.
6. Khalid, A. (2006). *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia*. University of California Press.
7. Morrison, A. (2008). *Russian Rule in Samarkand 1868–1910: A Comparison with British India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

