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Ethnic Dimensions of Slavery in the Khanate of Khiva: A Reassessment of Origins, Social Status and Emancipation (Eighteenth–Nineteenth Centuries)

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ABSTRACT

Objective: *This article reassesses how ethnicity, religious affiliation, skill and gender intersected to produce a stratified slave society in Khwarezm.* ***Method:*** *Drawing on a triangulation of three principal source-bodies — Khwarazmian court chronicles (Abu al-Ghazi Bahadur Khan, Munis, Agahi, Bayani), Iranian and Russian travel accounts and ambassadorial diaries (Mirpanji, Muhammad Ali Khan Ghafur, Murav'ev, Meyendorff, Vámbéry), and the archival collections of Orenburg (GAOO) and Tashkent (NAUz I-125), with critical synthesis of recent monographs by Eden (2018) and Tadjieva (2022).* ***Results:*** *The Khanate of Khiva (Khwarezm) was, over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of the largest centres of the Central Asian slave trade, holding between 29,000 and 40,000 enslaved persons on the eve of its conquest by the Russian Empire in 1873.* ***Novelty:*** *Despite the centrality of slavery to the khanate's agrarian, military and fiscal life, the role of ethnic origin in shaping the experiences, occupations and emancipation trajectories of enslaved people has received only fragmentary scholarly attention.*

INTRODUCTION

The Khanate of Khiva — the political successor of medieval Khwarezm — occupied between the seventeenth and the late nineteenth centuries a paradoxical position in the political economy of Inner Eurasia. Geographically peripheral, militarily weak relative to its neighbours, and economically dependent on the narrow band of irrigated land along the lower Amu Darya, it nevertheless functioned, alongside Bukhara, as the largest and most enduring slave-holding polity in Central Asia [1]. Contemporary Russian observers placed the number of slaves in the khanate at between 29,300 (Veselovskii, 1881) and over 40,000, with travellers such as Murav'ev (1822) and Vámbéry (1864) furnishing detailed eye-witness accounts of slave markets in Khiva, Hazarasp, and Urgench. Yet, as Eden observed, slavery in Muslim Central Asia has remained one of the most under-studied chapters of global slavery historiography, accounting for less than 3% of monograph-length scholarship on bondage worldwide [2].

Within this slender bibliography, the analytical category of ethnicity has been particularly neglected. Most extant studies — beginning with Faiziev's (1990) pioneering documentary edition and continuing through Tadjieva's (2022) monograph — treat slavery either as an institutional-legal phenomenon or as a chapter in Russo-Khivan diplomatic history [3]. The lived experience of slaves, and especially the way ethnic origin

structured that experience, has emerged in the literature only obliquely. The present article addresses this gap by asking three connected questions: (i) what was the ethnic composition of the enslaved population in nineteenth-century Khiva, and through which networks did each group enter bondage; (ii) how did ethnicity, in combination with religion, skill, and gender, determine the occupational and social trajectories of slaves; and (iii) to what extent did ethnic and confessional identity condition the dynamics of abolition in 1873?

The article proceeds in five sections. After this introduction, section 2 surveys the source-base and historiographical context. Section 3 sets out the methodology, which combines historical source-criticism with a comparative ethno-occupational analysis. Section 4 presents the empirical results in five sub-sections covering [4]: ethnic composition; geographies of capture; labour roles by ethnic group; market price and gender; and the abolition process. Section 5 discusses the findings against the broader scholarship on Islamic slavery and offers a revised interpretation of the 1873 abolition as a process driven, at least in part, by the agency of the enslaved themselves. A conclusion summarises the contribution and identifies directions for future research [5].

Literature Review and Source Base

The historiography of Khwarazmian slavery falls, as Tadjieva (2022, pp. 5–7) has argued, into three layers. The first comprises pre-twentieth-century chronicles and travel accounts. Among local sources, Abu al-Ghazi Bahadur Khan's Shajara-yi Turk (mid-seventeenth century) and Munis and Agahi's nineteenth-century dynastic histories supply scattered but evidentially decisive references to slave-raiding, ransoming, and the integration of female captives into the khan's harem [5]. Among foreign visitors, particular importance attaches to the Iranian envoys Muhammad Ali Khan Ghafur (1842) and Rizaqulikhan Hidayat (1851), and above all to Isma'il Mirpanji, an Iranian officer enslaved in Khiva for ten years whose memoir Khatirāt-i Asārat remains the single most detailed first-person testimony of slave life in the khanate. From the Russian side, the travelogues of Murav'ev (1822), Meyendorff (1840), Danilevskii (1851), Vámbéry (1864) and Vitkevich (1838) furnish quantitative and qualitative data on prices, markets, and ethnic composition [6].

The second layer comprises twentieth-century scholarship — predominantly Russian and Soviet — exemplified by Veselovskii's Ocherk istoriko-geograficheskikh svedenii o Khivinskom khanstve (1877, 1881), Bartol'd's encyclopaedic entries (1964), and the Soviet documentary work of Faiziev (1990). These studies catalogued archival holdings (in particular the Khivan court archive transferred to the National Archive of Uzbekistan under Fund I-125) and provided initial estimates of slave numbers, prices and revenues, but rarely engaged ethnicity as an analytic category [7].

The third and most recent layer comprises post-1991 monographs — most importantly Eden's Slavery and Empire in Central Asia (2018), based on Harvard University doctoral research, and Tadjieva's Khiva khonligida qulchilik munosabatlarining mohiyati va ijtimoiy oqibatlari (2022) — that have shifted attention to

slave testimony, ethnic differentiation, and the politics of abolition. The present article builds on these reorientations and supplements them with new analysis of the Orenburg archival collection detailing nineteenth-century Russian ransom missions, and with Tadjieva's reading of Iranian ambassadorial diaries that confirm the existence of dedicated Iranian-slave units within the khan's military entourage [8].

RESEARCH METHOD

The methodological design rests on three pillars. First, a source-critical reading triangulates Khwarazmian chronicles, Iranian ambassadorial accounts, Russian travelogues, and archival materials from the GAOO (Orenburg) and the Khivan court archive (NAUz I-125). Where sources diverge — for example, on slave prices or the volume of the trade — this article reports the range and identifies the most credible mid-point estimates rather than imposing a single number. Second, a comparative ethno-occupational analysis aggregates references in the source-base to occupations performed by slaves of each ethnic group (Iranian, Russian, Kazakh, Turkmen) and reconstructs an approximate occupational profile. Because no comprehensive census of slaves was ever taken in Khiva, the resulting estimates are necessarily indicative; they are presented with explicit uncertainty (see Figures 2 and 3). Third, a conceptual model (Figure 4) is proposed to formalise the intersection of ethnic origin, religious affiliation, skill, gender and geography of captivity in shaping the social status of the enslaved. This model is heuristic: it does not claim predictive power but organises the qualitative evidence into a manageable analytic frame.

Three methodological precautions deserve explicit acknowledgement. First, the bulk of the surviving narrative evidence comes from external observers — Russian officers, European travellers, Iranian envoys — whose perspectives were shaped by imperial competition and orientalist convention. Statements about the cruelty or benevolence of Khivan masters, in particular, must be read against the political agenda of the reporting source. Second, the local Khwarazmian chronicles, while invaluable for the political framing of slave-raiding campaigns, devote scant systematic attention to the slave system itself, treating it as an unremarkable background institution. Third, the archival corpus held in the NAUz Fund I-125 — the Khivan court archive — remains only partially catalogued and even less systematically published; the present study draws on the portion already exploited by Yo'ldoshev (1959), Faiziev (1990), Eden (2018) and Tadjieva (2022), and necessarily reproduces some of their lacunae. Where uncertainty is consequential — for instance, in the slave-population total, the share of each ethnic group, or the proportion of slaves actually freed in 1873 — the article reports ranges rather than point estimates.

Table 1 summarises the principal source-categories and the analytic uses to which they have been put in the present study, following a structure adapted from Tadjieva (2022, pp. 5–7) and extended to incorporate Eden (2018).

Table 1. Principal source-categories and their analytic uses.

No.	Source category	Key representative works	Analytic use in this article
1	Khwarazmian local chronicles	Abu al-Ghazi (1660s); Munis & Agahi (19th c.); Bayani (early 20th c.); Komyab.	Political context of slave-raiding; legitimating discourses; dynastic events.
2	Iranian travel diaries and embassy reports	Mirpanji (1860s, ed. 1991); Muhammad Ali Khan Ghafur (1842, ed. 2005); Rizaqulikhan Hidayat (1851, ed. 2009).	First-person slave testimony; diplomacy of ransoming; ethnographic detail on Iranian community in Khiva.
3	Russian travelogues, embassy and military reports	Murav'ev (1822); Meyendorff (1840); Blankenagel (1858); Vitkevich (1838); Vámbéry (1864); Lobysevich (1898).	Market prices; demographic estimates; military reportage; eye-witness accounts of slave conditions.
4	Russian archival fonds	GAOO (Orenburg) Fund 6, op. 10, files 1542–4993; NAUz Fund I-125 (Khivan court archive).	Ransom negotiations; trade-flow records; Khivan court correspondence; slave tax documents.
5	Soviet and post-Soviet monographs	Veselovskii (1877, 1881); Bartol'd (1964); Yo'ldoshev (1959); Faiziev (1990); Eden (2018); Tadjieva (2022).	Synthesis; quantitative framing; identification of archival corpora.

Sources: compiled by the author; categorisation adapted from Tadjieva (2022, pp. 5–7).

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Ethnic composition of the enslaved population

By the mid-nineteenth century, the enslaved population of the Khanate of Khiva was overwhelmingly composed of Iranian Shīʿite Muslims — predominantly Persians from Khurasan and Mazandaran, with a smaller component of Kurds — captured by Sunni Turkmen, particularly the Yomut and Teke confederations, in raids along the

Khurasan frontier [9]. The Iranian share has been estimated by Eden (2018) at roughly three-quarters of the total, a figure consistent with the embassy of Muhammad Ali Khan Ghafur, who in 1842 sought, ultimately without success, to ransom 30,000 Iranian captives held in the khanate [10].

Russian and Slavic captives — chiefly soldiers from the Orenburg and Ural frontier garrisons, fishermen seized in the Caspian, and peasants from the Astrakhan and Saratov gubernias — constituted a second, smaller but politically conspicuous, group. Archival materials in GAOO Fund 6 record sustained Russian government efforts between 1818 and 1842 to ransom these captives, culminating in the release of 80 prisoners in 1839 and a further 418 in 1842, under threat of military reprisal (Tadjieva, 2022, pp. 60–63). Kazakh, Kalmyk and other Steppe captives — taken in the course of inter-tribal raiding — completed the demographic picture. Figure 1 summarises the estimated composition [11].

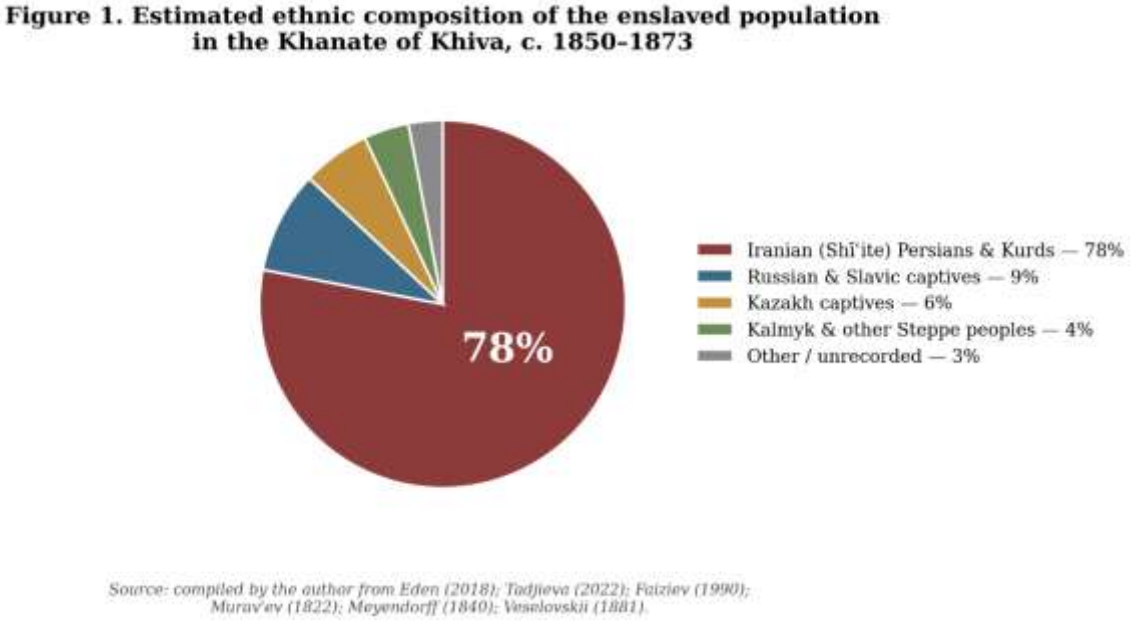

Figure 1. Estimated ethnic composition of the enslaved population in the Khanate of Khiva, c. 1850–1873.

Table 2 disaggregates these groups by their region of origin, dominant occupation, social position, and distinctive characteristics. The table summarises and refines the typology proposed in Mirzabek's original article and integrates the more granular evidence available in Eden (2018) and Tadjieva [12].

Table 2. Ethnic groups of enslaved persons in the Khanate of Khiva: origin, occupation, social position.

No.	Ethnic group	Region of origin	Principal occupation	Social position	Distinctive features
1	Iranians (Persians, Kurds)	Khurasan, Mazandaran, western Iran	Irrigated agriculture, crafts, calligraphy, domestic service	Relatively integrated; some manumitted into elite positions	Highest skill levels; rapid linguistic adaptation
2	Russians & Slavs	Orenburg & Ural frontier, Astrakhan, Caspian fisheries	Heavy manual labour, artillery, military service	Low to intermediate; subject of recurrent ransom diplomacy	Often retained Christian faith; valued for military expertise
3	Kazakhs	Lesser & Middle Jüz steppe	Herding, field labour, caravan service	Lower-middle; close cultural proximity to Turkmen owners	Nomadic experience; sometimes converted from captor to captive
4	Turkmen	Mangyshlak, Khurasan-borderlands	Pastoral economy, household service, occasionally military	Intermediate; embedded in local kin networks	Cultural proximity to the dominant group
5	Kalmyks & other steppe peoples	Volga steppe, Dzungaria	Pastoral, domestic labour	Variable; some baptised, some converted to Islam	Often renamed by owners (e.g. "Manas")
6	Caucasian (Circassian, Georgian)	South Caucasus, via Iran	Domestic service, harem	Variable; women frequently entered elite households	Small but ethnographically significant minority

Sources: compiled by the author from Eden (2018, pp. 25–35); Tadjieva (2022, pp. 31–33, 99–103); Faiziev (1990); Murav'ev (1822); Meyendorff (1840); Vámbéry (1864).

Geographies of capture and the slave-trade infrastructure

The supply networks that fed the Khivan slave market were not the centralised, urban systems familiar from Ottoman or Atlantic histories of slavery; they were decentralised, predominantly rural, and organised along caravan routes (Eden, 2018, pp.

5–6). Yomut and Teke Turkmen bands conducted seasonal raids — known as alaman — across the Khurasan frontier, returning with Iranian captives whom they sold either directly to Khivan and Bukharan merchants or, more commonly, exchanged for livestock, textiles or arms. Eden documents trade ratios as varied as 36 sheep for one slave; one camel, three horses and three felt carpets for another; and twenty Khivan silk khalats (robes) for a third. These exchanges underscore that the slave trade was embedded in, rather than separate from, the wider pastoral economy [13].

Russian captives entered the trade through a different but parallel network. Soldiers captured in skirmishes along the Caspian and Ural frontiers, fishermen seized on the Emba estuary, and peasants taken in long-distance Kazakh raids were transported across the steppe to Khiva, where they were sold at prices typically higher than those commanded by Iranian male captives [13]. The Russian state's ransom system, formalised in 1820 with the establishment of fixed redemption rates, perversely intensified rather than dampened the trade by signalling a reliable upper-bound price [14].

Occupational and social roles by ethnic group

Ethnic origin was a primary, though not the only, determinant of the labour role assigned to enslaved persons. Figure 2 summarises the occupational distribution by ethnic group, reconstructed from the qualitative evidence in Eden, Tadjieva, Faiziev, Mirpanji and the principal travelogues [15].

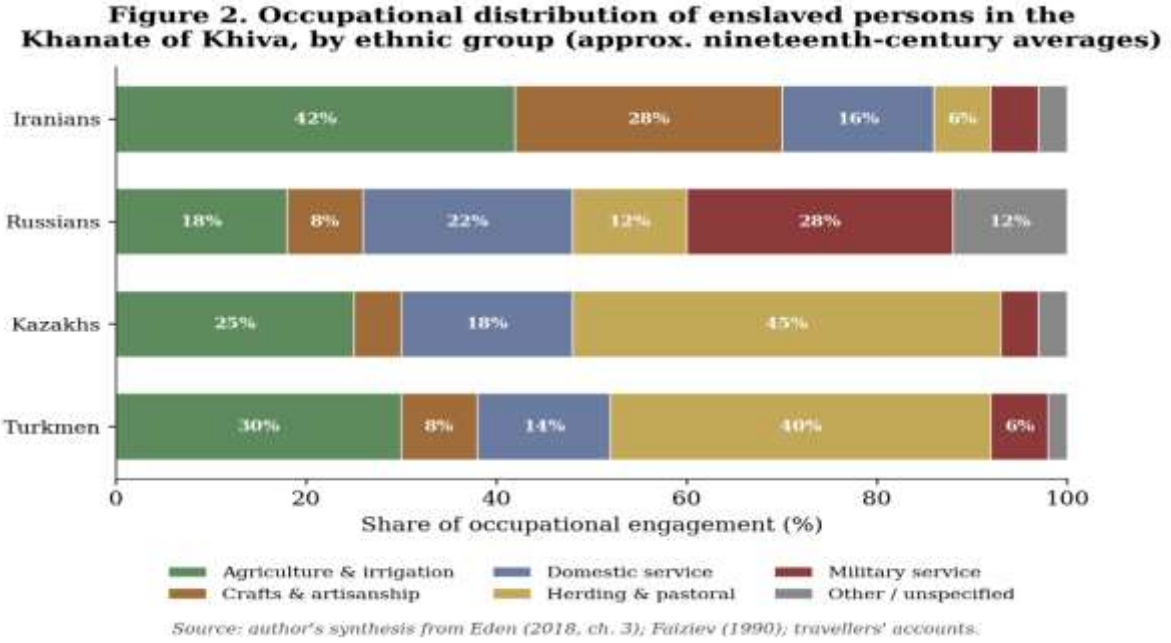

Figure 2. Occupational distribution of enslaved persons in the Khanate of Khiva, by ethnic group (indicative nineteenth-century averages).

Three patterns deserve emphasis. First, Iranian slaves dominated the high-value urban crafts — calligraphy, painting, blacksmithing, accounting, medicine — and the irrigated agriculture that underpinned the khanate's economy. The autobiography of

Mirzā Maḥmūd Taqī Āshtiyānī, analysed in detail by Eden, enumerates a single Iranian slave's successive employment as herdsman, water-bearer, calligrapher, painter, accountant, doctor, and Arabic teacher; though exceptional, his trajectory illustrates the social ceiling available to talented, literate Iranians in the urban environment. Second, Russian slaves were disproportionately drawn into military and artillery service. Tadjieva records that Vasilii Lavrent'ev served from 1838 as commander of the khan's artillery; a Russian named Sergei is described in the 1842 Danilevskii embassy report as the khan's "minister of artillery". The Khivan military, indeed, increasingly relied on Russian and Iranian slaves for its modern weaponry — a dependence that, as section 4.5 argues, conditioned the dynamics of the 1873 collapse. Third, Kazakh and Turkmen slaves were concentrated in the pastoral and steppe-adjacent economy in which they already possessed inherited expertise [16].

The role of religion in mediating these distributions deserves separate emphasis. Shīʿite Iranian captives, although doctrinally proximate to their Sunni Khivan owners, were treated under a legal-cum-theological framework that classified them as appropriate objects of enslavement [17]. Conversion to Sunni Islam was actively encouraged for Iranians and could open paths to manumission and limited integration. Russian Christian captives, by contrast, were generally not pressured to convert — Mikhailov (1873) records former captives' testimony that Khivans neither denigrated their faith nor obstructed their worship — and many retained their Orthodox identity throughout long bondage. The conceptual model of Figure 4 formalises these intersecting determinants of slave status [18].

It is important to situate these practices against the Islamic legal framework that Khivan jurists ostensibly observed. Classical Islamic law does not abolish slavery but circumscribes it: enslavement of free Muslims is prohibited; manumission is recommended as a meritorious act and is incorporated into the law of zakat and kaffārāt; and the Qur'anic institution of mukātaba permits a slave to negotiate self-purchase with a master [19]. In principle, therefore, enslavement was theologically restricted to non-Muslim war captives, and Khivan jurists invoked the formal heterodoxy of Iranian Shīʿites — classifying them as non-Muslims for legal purposes — to legitimise the enslavement of Iranian Muslims. This juridical manoeuvre, criticised by reformist Muslim scholars then and since, exposes the tension between Khivan practice and Islamic legal-ethical norms. Conversely, the Islamic framework helps explain certain mitigating features documented in the sources: the institutionalised celebration of a three-day slaves' holiday during Ramadan; the practice of providing seasonal clothing and food allowances; the toleration of Christian Russian worship; and the relatively common manumission of female slaves who bore children to their owners [20].

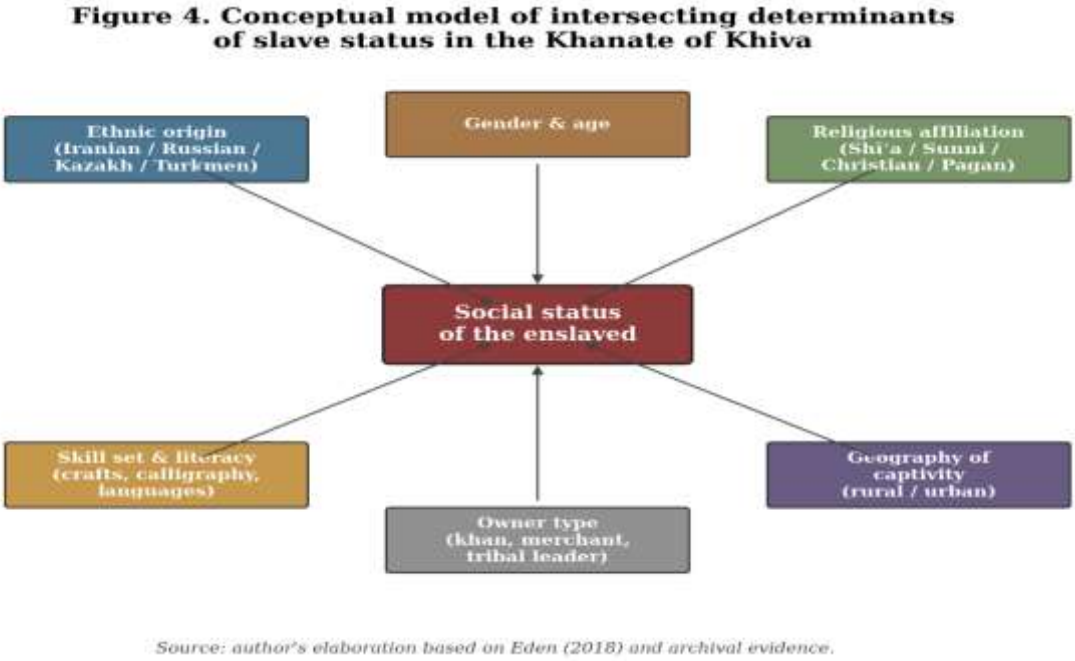

Figure 4. Conceptual model of intersecting determinants of slave status in the Khanate of Khiva.

Market prices, gender and skill

Prices at the Khiva and Bukhara bazaars provide a further window on how ethnicity, gender and skill were translated into economic valuation. Travellers' accounts converge on a band of 25–60 gold ṭilla (chervonets) for an adult male of unspecified background, with substantial variation by origin, sex, age, and skill [21]. Murav'ev (1822, pp. 57–58, 148) reported Iranian men fetching 20–30 ṭilla against 60–80 for Russian men — a differential he attributed to Russians' presumed physical strength and military utility — while Iranian women commanded substantially higher prices than Russian women. Kurdish captives were typically the cheapest. Skilled craftsmen, irrespective of origin, could reach 100–150 ṭilla. Figure 3 visualises these reported price bands.

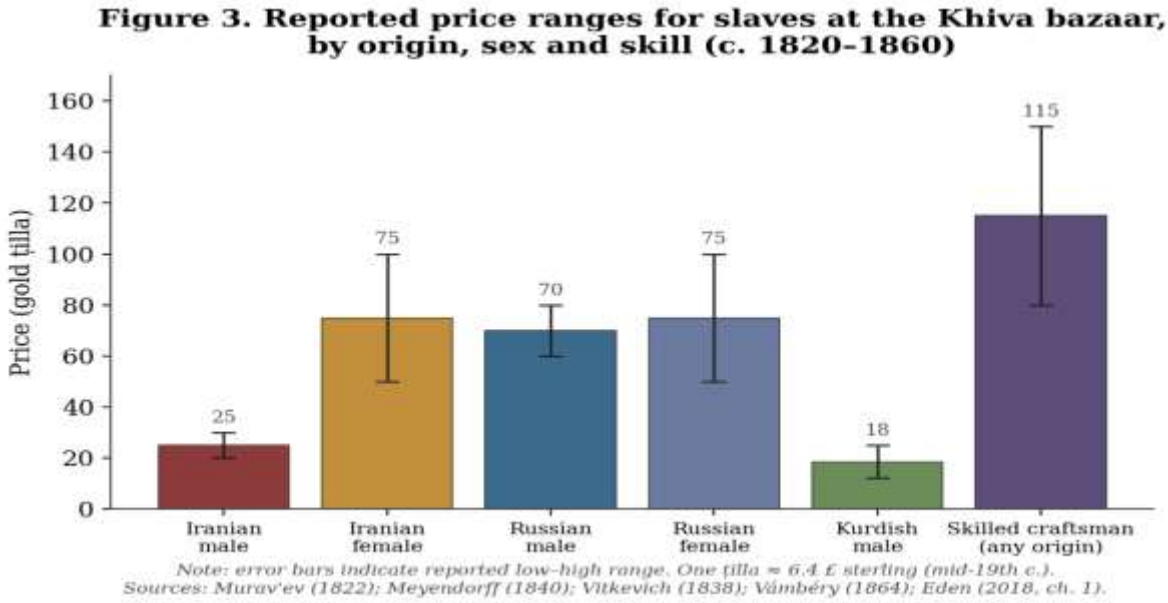

Figure 3. Reported price ranges for slaves at the Khiva bazaar, by origin, sex and skill (c. 1820–1860).

Beyond cash transactions, slaves were extensively bartered for sheep, horses, camels, silk robes and weaponry. Eden (2018, p. 26) records one slave traded for 100 sheep, another for 22 sheep and a horse, another for nine horses, a fleece coat and a gun. The same individual could be sold and re-sold many times, with substantial variation between transactions; one slave initially sold to a Khivan by Turkmen for 9 ṭilla was later sold to a Kazakh for 29 ṭilla and finally traded for 20 silk khalats [22]. These price patterns confirm that the trade was simultaneously economic and social: ethnic markers were read as predictors of productivity, docility and resale value, and were priced accordingly.

Abolition, ethnicity and the agency of the enslaved

The 1873 abolition of slavery in the Khanate of Khiva has long been ascribed in imperial historiography to the humanitarian intervention of General K.P. von Kaufman following the Russian conquest [23]. Figure 5 sets the abolition within the longer timeline of slavery and emancipation in the khanate.

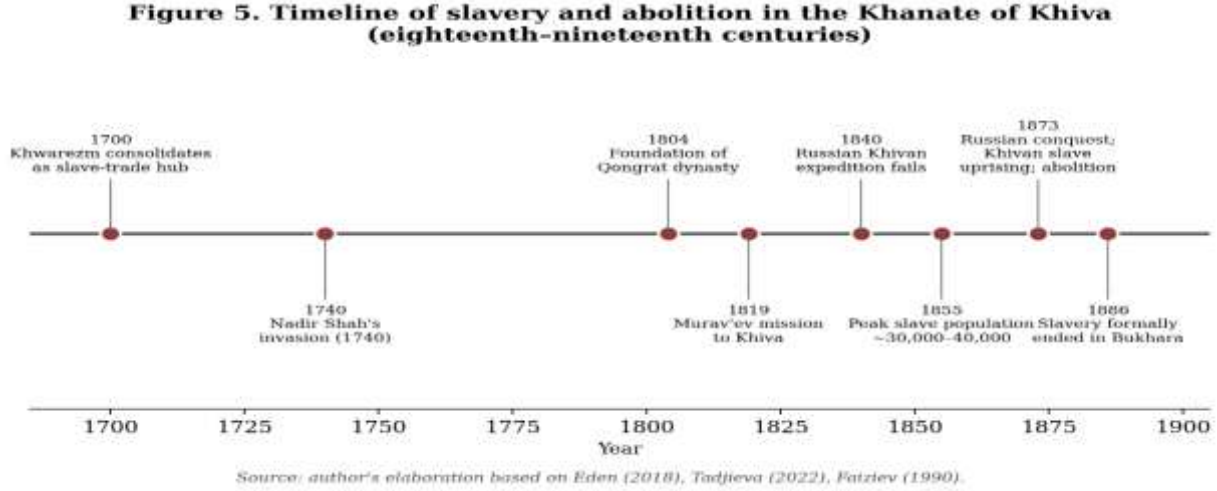

Figure 5. Timeline of slavery and abolition in the Khanate of Khiva (eighteenth–nineteenth centuries).

Recent scholarship has dismantled this Russocentric narrative. Eden's (2016, 2018) close reading of Khwarazmian, Iranian and Russian sources demonstrates that the conquering general had made no plans whatsoever for the manumission of slaves before the campaign and that no infrastructure or treaties existed even in Bukhara (taken in 1868) to guarantee the freedom of a single slave [24]. The decisive event was instead a slave uprising in Khiva itself in the days following the Russian entry — the largest such rising in the region's history — which presented Kaufman with an accomplished fact. With a Khwarazmian military disproportionately composed of Iranian slaves having already been routed, and with the slaves themselves "unwilling to wait for a Russian invitation to cast off their chains", the abolition decree of 1873 ratified rather than initiated the collapse of the slave system. The decision to extend abolition to Bukhara a few months later was driven, as Eden argues, by the impossibility of "countenancing Bukharan slavery" while reducing the emirate to protectorate status under "the eyes of the world" [25].

Ethnicity was central to this dynamic. The Iranian Shīʿite captives — a long-aggrieved, doctrinally distinct, numerically dominant population, many of them militarised, with linguistic and confessional ties to a foreign sovereign (the Qajar Shah) — possessed exactly the demographic and political characteristics needed to translate a localised disturbance into a system-wide rupture. Russian and other captives, smaller in number and less coordinated, would have struggled to produce a comparable effect. In short, the conjunction of imperial pressure and ethnically organised slave agency, not Russian benevolence, produced abolition. The aftermath was uneven. Schuyler (1876, II, p. 354) estimated that of approximately 30,000 slaves in the khanate, no more than 5,000 had been "actually freed" — that is, repatriated or fully liberated — before the departure of the Russian forces, while many others remained in conditions of de facto bondage, debt servitude or indenture [26].

Many former Iranian captives chose to remain in Khwarezm. By the early Soviet period, distinctive Iranian neighbourhoods (mahalla) had emerged in Khiva and Tāshḥawż, served by two specifically Iranian mosques. Many descendants gradually shifted from Persian to Uzbek as their primary language while retaining a sense of distinct community identity [27]. Today, the eroniy (Iranian) communities of Uzbekistan — including a Shīʿite congregation in the Panjob neighbourhood of Samarqand — preserve the ethnographic residue of this slave system.

Discussion

The findings reported above carry three interpretive implications. First, they reinforce the case for treating Central Asian slavery as a distinct sub-type within the global Islamic-world historiography of bondage. Whereas Ottoman slavery has been characterised — in the influential framework of Toledano (2007) — as predominantly urban, military and elite-domestic, Khwarazmian slavery emerges from the present

evidence as predominantly rural, agricultural and pastoral. The decentralised caravan-based geography of capture, the absence of large slave-trading firms, and the embedding of exchange in pastoral barter all distinguish the Khivan case from both Ottoman and Atlantic models [28].

Second, the evidence vindicates the ethnographic turn in slavery studies. Aggregate institutional analysis cannot capture the divergent experiences of an Iranian calligrapher employed at the khan's court, a Russian soldier commanding artillery, a Kazakh herder driving sheep on the steppe, and a Kalmyk concubine renamed by her owner. Each ethnic-occupational profile entailed distinct vulnerabilities, opportunities and pathways to manumission. The model in Figure 4 is offered as one way to organise this complexity analytically, but case-by-case ethnographic reconstruction remains indispensable.

Third, and most consequentially, the role of slave agency in the 1873 abolition compels a revision of the dominant narrative. The Russocentric account, perpetuated in Soviet-era Russian-language scholarship and in many post-1991 textbooks, presented the conquest as a humanitarian act and the slaves as passive beneficiaries. The evidence assembled by Eden (2016, 2018) and supplemented by Tadjieva's (2022) reading of local archives shows that this account is untenable. Recognising the Khivan slave uprising of 1873 as a constitutive moment of Central Asian abolition restores the agency of the enslaved and aligns the regional historiography with the broader global recognition — from the Haitian Revolution onward — that slavery has rarely ended without the active intervention of the enslaved themselves.

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding: This article has reassessed the role of ethnic factors in the slavery system of the Khanate of Khiva between the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Three principal conclusions emerge. First, the enslaved population of nineteenth-century Khiva was overwhelmingly Iranian Shīʿite, with smaller Russian, Kazakh and Kalmyk components; this ethnic profile was the direct product of Yomut and Teke Turkmen raiding networks operating along the Khurasan frontier. Second, ethnicity, in interaction with religion, skill, gender and the urban–rural geography of captivity, structured the occupational and social trajectories of slaves: Iranians dominated agriculture and the urban crafts, Russians the modernising military, and Kazakhs and Turkmen the pastoral economy. Third, the abolition of slavery in 1873 was not the gift of Russian humanitarianism but the outcome of a slave uprising in Khiva itself — the largest in the region's history — which Russian commanders ratified rather than initiated. **Implication:** The article contributes to three literatures. To the historiography of the Khanate of Khiva, it offers a synthesis of recent Anglophone and Uzbek-language scholarship and a quantitatively informed reconstruction of the slave system's ethnic and occupational profile. To the global historiography of Islamic slavery, it argues for the

analytic distinctiveness of the Central Asian sub-type. To Uzbekistan's contemporary engagement with its pre-colonial past, it offers an evidence-based corrective to lingering Russocentric narratives of emancipation. **Limitation:** Future research should aim, first, at a systematic edition and translation of the Khivan court archive's slavery-related documents (NAUz I-125). **Future Research:** Future research should aim, second, at quantitative micro-history of post-1873 outcomes — in particular, the extent of effective manumission, the trajectories of repatriation to Iran, and the formation of eroniy diaspora communities whose descendants continue to live in Uzbekistan today.

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