

Of nomads and khanates: heteronomy and interpolity order in 19th-century Central Asia

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Abstract

Scholars of International Relations (IR) and Global Historical Sociology alike have recently become more and more interested in Eurasian order(s). Yet, most recent works on Eurasian historical international relations approach the subject from a long *durée* perspective, mostly focusing on “big polities” from a “high altitude.” Central Asia, or “Turkestan,” and its constitutive polities such as the khanates of Bukhara, Khiva, and Khoqand and the vast array of nomadic groups surrounding them are yet *terra incognita* in IR, specifically with respect to the pre-Tsarist period. By relying on both primary and secondary sources, this inductive research reveals how precolonial Central Asia was an interpolity order on its own, premised on heteronomy and based on the institutions of sovereignty between the khanates and suzerainty between khanates and nomads; territoriality; Sunni Islam; trade and slavery; diplomacy; and war and *aq oyluk*. This paper contributes to filling this gap, and to the broader literature on Eurasian historical orders, in three respects. First, it adds granularity, detail, and specificity to current IR knowledge on Eurasia by looking at smaller polities as opposed to empires, which as noted have been the main analytical focus so far. Second, the paper adopts an emic approach to uncover local practices, institutions, and norms of precolonial Central Asia, thus adding to the recent “Global IR” debate. Third, by focusing on a case where heteronomy was the rule, this paper adds a new case to the literature on the entrenchment and durability of heteronomy in historical IR and contributes to its theory-building.

Keywords

Historical sociology, international history, order, English School, heteronomy, Eurasia

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Scholars of International Relations (IR) and Global Historical Sociology alike have recently become more and more interested in the study of Eurasian order(s), to the extent that one can speak of a proper “Eurasian turn.” In fact, most of the recent scholarly production on Eurasian politics in the past has uncovered the fundamental normative elements of its cosmology (Spruyt, 2020), its contribution to (international) political theory and ideas of sovereignty and order (Zarakol, 2022), and the crucial role that “the steppe tradition” has played in forging polities and interpolity relations across the centuries up to the present (Neumann and Wigen, 2018). Yet, most recent works on Eurasian historical international relations approach the subject from a *long durée* perspective, and mostly focusing on “big polities” such as the Moghul, Mongol, Ottoman, Qing, Russian and Safavid empires studied from a “high altitude.”

While these “high altitude” studies on Eurasia are of fundamental importance to advance our understanding of models of international politics different from the modern European one, they necessarily brush over the agency and the order-making role of smaller polities, which were equally important in sustaining and perpetuating the broader system of relations in the area. In addition, and linked to the previous point, they also run the risk of missing out on the inherent diversity that constituted such smaller polities—a diversity which nonetheless did not obstruct the establishment of ordered pattern of relations (Phillips and Sharman, 2015a, 2015b).

By drawing on and combining insights deriving from Historical IR, Global Historical Sociology, and English School theory (ES), this paper contributes to and advances both literatures, that on Eurasian historical orders and that on order in diversity, by focusing on the case of Central Asia in the 19th century, understood in this paper as Transoxiana, or *Mawarannahr*, or more specifically as the three khanates of Bukhara, Khiva and Khoqand, the nomadic communities of the Kyrgyz, the Kazakhs and the Turkmens, and their surrounding empires—the Ottoman, the Tsarist, and the Qing. Through the use of secondary and, at least in IR, previously unknown primary sources, the paper shows how these very different polities used specific institutions to create and sustain a durable order despite their heterogeneity and the marked heteronomy present in the region, with heteronomy defined as “a patchwork of overlapping and incomplete rights of government,” under which “the distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ political realms, separated by clearly demarcated ‘boundaries,’ [makes] little sense” (Ruggie, 1983: 274). Namely, these institutions were sovereignty and suzerainty, territoriality, Sunni Islam, trade and slavery, diplomacy, and war and *aq oyluk*. As will be argued later in the paper, specific interpretations of the abovementioned institutions, and the rootedness of some of their associated practices and cultural priors in the highly hybridized Turco–Persian cultural substratum, contributed to sustaining and legitimizing a highly diverse interpolity order without necessarily inducing, let alone imposing, homogenization.

This paper contributes to the two literatures identified above in a tripartite way. First, it adds granularity, detail, and specificity to current IR knowledge on Eurasia by looking at smaller polities as opposed to empires, which as noted have been the main analytical focus so far. It offers an interpretivist (but also socio-structural) account of pre-Tsarist Central Asia in the 19th century with the use of both secondary and primary sources highlighting the agency of smaller polities and their role in sustaining, and perpetuating, the practices that informed the wider Eurasian order. Second, thanks to the use of

previously unexplored primary sources and secondary sources *on* and *from* the realm investigated, the paper adopts an emic approach to uncover local practices, institutions, and norms (or different interpretation thereof from the “European benchmark”) of precolonial Central Asia, thus adding to the recent “Global IR” debate (Acharya, 2014). A case in point presented in this paper is that of territoriality, which contra the prevailing narrative was not exported “from the West to the rest,” but was actually already in the region, and even among nomadic polities albeit with specific understandings (Costa Buranelli, 2014, 2020). In this respect, the paper speaks not simply to scholars interested in Eurasian order(s), but also and especially to those striving to decenter Europe while challenging the uniqueness of the European sovereign state system, suggesting that “focusing on similarities can be an alternative way to address the issue of Eurocentrism in IR” (Mukoyama, 2022: 22). Third, by focusing on a case where heteronomy was the rule, and where diversity was ultimately converted into homogeneity only through forceful colonial conquest in the second half of the 19th century, this paper adds a new case to the literature on the entrenchment and durability of heteronomy in historical IR and contributes to its theory-building (Phillips and Sharman, 2015b: 222).

The paper is structured as follows. The first section discusses how to theorize Central Asia in the 19th century as an interpolity order marked by heteronomy, clarifies the meaning of institutions adopted in the paper, and presents the methodological rationale for the case selection and the chosen timeframe. The second section identifies the *foundational* institutions of the region—sovereignty, territoriality, and Sunni Islam. The third section focuses on the *procedural* institutions of the region, that is, trade (and its derivative of slavery), diplomacy, and war (and its derivative of *aq oyluk*). In the fourth and concluding section, the value and the limits of this paper are discussed, as well as its contribution to the three literatures on Eurasian historical orders, heteronomy and order, and Global IR.

Theorizing interpolity relations and heteronomy in 19th-century Central Asia

The recent literature on Eurasian historical orders has identified several indigenous, specific characteristics of such orders, among which a vast plurality of political communities (from empires to houses, from settled city-states to nomadic communities) and a persistent hybridization of anarchy and hierarchy. In line with these findings, this paper makes three analytical moves. First, when theorizing or making general arguments, I define Central Asian political communities in the 19th century as *polities*, that is, groups of humans that have self-reflected identities, or “we-ness,” a capacity to mobilize resources and a degree of institutionalization and hierarchy (Neumann and Wigen, 2018: 27). This allows me to free myself up from the Euro- and state-centric straitjacket, and to analyze political order in a context where the modern European state had not been institutionalized. However, in the empirical section of the paper, I will resort to the emic terminology of *khanates*, *zhuzes*, and *ulus*.

Second, I argue that anarchy and hierarchy are not necessarily dichotomous arrangements but can in fact coexist in a multiplicity of structural arrangements that present

elements of both—this is called heteronomy and echoes already Bull’s (1977) idea of neo-medievalism,¹ and Watson’s swinging pendulum (1992). This means that unequal arrangements sometimes get bargained in otherwise anarchical situations. Such arrangements may last for several reasons. For example, because of the inability of one polity or set of polities to overtake the others, or because of functional differentiation, or simply because the basic goals of the system in question—as will be evident below—do not require homogeneity of rule. From an ES perspective, this means that a given order does not have to be necessarily premised on either anarchy or hierarchy provided that there are shared institutions and practices accepted by the actors involved to coexist and maintain this diverse structural arrangement.² As the analysis of the Central Asian system in the 19th century presented below will reveal, the mix of anarchy and hierarchy was in fact quite consolidated. Third, and following from the previous point, I consider these polities living in heteronomy as resting on a shared set of *hybrid practices and forms of legitimacy* inherited by previous relations between steppe and sedentary polities (Neumann and Wigen, 2018: 8).

These three moves allow me to elaborate on how the Central Asian polities established and conducted their relations in diversity and heteronomy. To do so, I resort to the analytical concept of institutions, understood in ES sense as patterned practices, or practices that are routinized, typical, and recurrent [. . .] based, usually, on coherent sets of ideas and/or beliefs that describe the needs for the common practices and point out how certain social goals can be achieved through them while prescribing “how the critical actors or agents should behave, under what conditions they can do certain things, what types of activities and actions are proscribed, and what protocols and etiquette should be observed in various circumstances” (Holsti, 2009: 21–22). Following Holsti, I also consider institutions to be divided into *foundational* and *procedural*. Foundational institutions define and give privileged status to specific actors, identifying the fundamental principles, rules, and norms upon which their mutual relations are based and leading to highly patterned forms of action (Holsti, 2009: 25). Conversely, procedural institutions are “those repetitive practices, ideas, and norms that underlie and regulate interactions and transactions” between actors in the social context under examination and pertain to “more instrumental issues of how we behave towards one another in the conduct of both conflict and normal intercourse” (ibidem). The reason for choosing this taxonomy is due to the highly inductive nature of the research. Having approached both secondary and primary sources without knowing what institutions I would find (if any), Holsti’s scheme provided a solid, as well as simple way to categorize my findings, especially since the foundational and procedural nature of the institutions uncovered through the research was strongly visible from the materials at my disposal.

But how can (foundational and procedural) institutions allow for the study of heteronomy? Crucially, Phillips and Sharman, (2015a, 2015b) offer three different sets of explanations for the durability of diverse international systems based on realism, rationalism, and constructivism. Yet, in light of the three abovementioned analytical steps undertaken, this paper makes the case that the ES can offer some theorization thereof, too. In this paper, foundational and procedural institutions are patterned practices as defined above with a crucial, additional function. Being these practices hybrid and

hybridizing, in this context, institutions work as normative sites where heteronomy can unfold and be accommodated thanks to shared priors. In other words, the bundle of practices (or understandings thereof) that constitute them can be diverse and different *but can still operate and be intersubjectively legitimate given their shared roots in previous cultural consensus*. In the empirical section of the paper, the analysis will focus on those practices within the specific institutions identified inductively that facilitated, and indeed sustained, the heteronomy of Central Asia in the 19th century.

As shall be discussed at length in the next section, the foundational institution of this specific regional interpolity order were sovereignty and suzerainty, territoriality, and Sunni Islam, while the procedural were trade and slavery, diplomacy, and war and its derivative of *aq oyluk*. The Central Asian order resulting from the interplay of these institutions presented specific characteristics. First, it featured overlapping and competing sovereignties, rooted in Turkic and Chinggisid understandings of hierarchy and suzerainty with elements of Islamic legitimacy. As has been argued, Central Asian rulers in the 19th century “followed both nomadic political traditions and Islamic authority without any contradiction” (Shioya, 2022: 83).

Second, these sovereignties were often negotiated and arranged through diplomatic missions, intermarriages, and the provision of military services and trade access. Third, the system relied on a circular economy which, thanks to the synergy between nomads’ mobility, extended networks throughout neighboring imperial centers, and periodic fairs taking place in the city-states, worked as a capillary system for the circulation of goods as well as ideas. Fourth, the Central Asian order was somehow spontaneous and not consciously devised, although as shall be discussed below there was a “regional awareness” that made at least possible to consider others’ actions when conducting relations with other polities. This means that strictly speaking there were no “order-makers.” Rather, the Central Asian order was the product of sustained interaction capacity, shared and compatible cultural priors, and different but compatible preferences. This may remind one of how Waltz (1990) famously insisted that the spontaneous order of anarchy “obtains whether the system is composed of tribes, nations, oligopolistic firms, or street gangs.” (p. 70). Fifth, finally, and linked to the previous point, the *raison de système* of the Central Asian system was not particularly strong, or engrained, with the result that when confronted by an invader, namely the Tsarist Empire, even a modicum of balance of power or concerted action failed to materialize.

In terms of sources and data used for this study, my research has found that original written records from that period are rather scattered, since oral culture had still a great value among those populations at that time, and therefore, I had to rely largely on secondary sources.

Yet, while one may agree with Theda Skocpol that “excellent studies by specialists” are “the basic source of evidence for a given study,” especially when there is “the need to venture outside one own’s immediate area of expertise” (quoted in Neumann and Wigen, 2018: 16), it is, I argue, possible to rely also on a variety of “autoptic” sources (like accounts, chronicles, or memoirs of travelers or diplomats in the region) contemporary to the events dealt with in this paper, and on those primary, local sources that are accessible and have been translated whenever they had been written in a different

language. These sources, especially when coming from European and Russian authors, should be carefully analyzed and triangulated with other sources. This is because of well-known orientalist, racist, and imperialist vision held by several diplomats, travelers, and scholars in the period under study.

Yet, the value of these sources must not be underestimated. As a matter of fact, these narratives are not only provided to us by explorers, soldiers, travelers, and scholars who were *in loco* and therefore close to the socio-geographical space under inquiry, but also convey to us an important flavor of the spirit of the times, the *Zeitgeist* prevailing in the region, in which the norms and institutions of different peoples were mixed, coexisted and often clashed. The research strategy adopted to deal with these sources is to use them only if cross-confirmed between themselves and across the specialized secondary literature, and to acknowledge that especially when dealing with primary sources collected from the polities under consideration attention should be paid to the political context in which these sources were produced (Pickett, 2016; Sartori, 2016).

In addition, the secondary sources consulted are not simply those of well-known scholars in their respective fields, but are also, whenever possible, produced by researchers who are familiar with local archives, languages, and primary materials, and who therefore add an incredibly deep knowledge on the matter at hand making it available in translated form. All this may not amount to the desirable level of depth and breadth of research, especially keeping in mind the necessity to delve more into Central Asian and local sources and materials. Yet, provided that the researcher displays subjective adequacy, that is, has intimate knowledge of the region and can directly access local sources in their language, such sources can allow entry into both the institutional framework and the social meaning thereof.

Philosophically and methodologically, the paper draws on analyticism, as institutions are patterns of interaction that are repeated over time and hence apt for ideal-typification (Jackson, 2010: 128–135; Neumann and Wigen, 2018: 202–208). The reason for this choice is primarily due to the implicitly comparative nature of the analysis presented here, where Europe is a “shadow case” (Phillips and Sharman, 2015b: 207). In other words, the paper uses the institutions of the modern European order in an implicit comparative fashion, to highlight the particular features of the Central Asian order in terms of specific interpretations and practice of the abovementioned institutions and their contribution to order and heteronomy—a well-known device to enhance “understanding” in anthropology.

Before proceeding to the empirical section of the paper, two additional clarifying steps are required. The first step is to address why the paper is concerned primarily with the three polities of Bukhara, Khiva, and Khoqand and the nomadic polities surrounding them, especially the Kyrgyz around the territory of Khoqand, the Turkmen around the territory of Khiva, and the Kazakhs living in the southern steppes of present-day Kazakhstan.³ After all, not only were there several smaller polities and important centers between and around these communities, but this area was also surrounded by imperial formations which did have an impact on their dynamics, particularly the Ottoman Empire in the West, the Tsarist Empire in the north and the Qing Empire in the East. My justification for this choice is as follows. First, on the basis of the existing literature (e.g. Kwan,

2016; MacKay, 2013; Pardesi, 2018), the paper does acknowledge their presence and their importance in the intra-regional, Central Asian dynamics of the 19th century. As will be made evident in the empirical section of the paper, especially in matters of trade, diplomacy, and suzerainty, the relations between Central Asian polities and the surrounding polities were significant. The only exception made in the analysis is for the British Empire, for as recent scholarship has convincingly shown, its role in the so-called “Great Game” was limited at best (Morrison, 2014). Simply, as explained in the introduction, the paper recovers and centers the agency of the smaller, less researched polities, thus making them *the main, though not the exclusive*, analytical focus. Second, several historical and area-studies works make clear that, although not the only ones, the three city-states of Bukhara, Khiva, and Khoqand and the nomadic communities surrounding them *conceived of themselves*, and *were seen*, as a regional environment (Khalid, 2021; Pickett, 2016; Shioya, 2022). As has been noted, Cinggisid rule vanished gradually in the ‘khanates’. The ruling families of Jochid khans [. . .] were replaced by leading lineages of two Uzbek tribes, the Manghits in Bukhara (late-18th century) and the Qongrats in Khwarazm (the region of Khiva). While both ruling families still referred to some kind of Chinggisid descent, it turned out that their regionalist understanding of their territory concentrated more and more on the traditional—“pre-ulusist”—regions of Khwarazm and Sogdia/Transoxiana/Mavarrannahr, and although the Ming rulers from Qoqand continued to challenge the amirs of Bukhara militarily and politically, *their territorial concept was bound to the three great and ancient regions of this area as they were already defined in antiquity: Khwarazm, Sogdia/Transoxiana, and Farghana* (Fragner, 2001: 352–353, emphasis added).

The second step is to explain why exactly the focus of this research is on the 19th century. The reason for this is twofold. First, as explained earlier, most existing accounts of Eurasia in IR look at alternative periods at polities of the history of this region, thus leaving somehow underexplored the kind of political order that was established in Central Asia before the Tsarist conquest in the second half of the 19th century (for a partial exception, see Costa Buranelli, 2014).

Second, and related to the first point, it has now been amply discussed how the 19th century was a pivotal turning point in the history of world politics, where fundamental military, economic, territorial, cultural, industrial, and normative changes took place which then shaped the course of international relations (Buzan and Lawson, 2015; Dunne and Reus-Smit, 2017; Schulz, 2019). In general, and thus also in Eurasia, the 19th century was the period of “nationalizing empires” (Zarakol, 2022). Yet, that was not the case for Central Asia, which embraced full processes of nationalization and integration with Western politics during the Tsarist colonization and, mostly, during the Soviet period. In many respects, Central Asia was part of these globalizing forces (Levi, 2017), mostly through its connections with Qing China and Tsarist Russia, but these forces were not conducive to a radical change in politics and political culture. However, this does not mean that the region was anomic or normatively void. In fact, as the next sections will make evident, Central Asia in the 19th century was not a *tabula rasa* on which the Tsarist empire expanded and colonized but was a regional interpolity order in its own right with its defining institutions.

The foundational institutions of 19th-century Central Asia

Sovereignty

In the three city-states of Bukhara, Khiva, and Khoqand, the khans adopted a strong conception of sovereignty. The khan was not just the symbol, but the *embodiment* of sovereignty. Following Islamic and Ottoman traditions, in the sedentary part of the region, two visible characters of sovereignty were visible: the first one was the *hutbe*, the prayer said in honor of the sovereign, while the second one was the *sikke*, that is, the right to produce and circulate money (Pamuk, 2000: 16). Coins and money present in the khanates (and in the steppe whenever their suzerainty extended to that limit) had the name of the sovereign carved on them (Boukhary, 1876: 160; Howorth, 1876).

However, the character of sovereignty in the Central Asian khanates at that time was in fact, at least nominally, “bestowed,” “exogenous.” True, the emir/khan was considered the sovereign over his territory. And true, his sovereignty was somehow derived internally, through dynasticism (Manz, 1994). Yet, one can configure the sovereignty of the khan as granted by a “nominal suzerainty” (Watson, 1992: 114). Historical accounts of the region show how it was customary in the region, every time a new ruler was elected, to appeal to Constantinople to gain legitimacy (Saray, 2003: 193).

As explorers such as de Meyendorf (1826), Burnes (1834), and Trotter (1873: 57) report, and as confirmed by autograph letters from the khans to the Ottoman Porte from that period (translated in Saray, 2003: 273–275, 281), it was customary practice to send a member of the clergy or an envoy to the Sultan of Constantinople as a sign of deference and suzerainty.⁴ The envoy was sent to Constantinople to ask for a *firman* legitimizing the ascension to the throne of the new ruler, often adding the request for the provision of *tug* and *kiliç* (“plume” and “sword”) as symbols of sovereignty. This practice was performed by all the khanates in the region and confirmed somehow at least their *de jure* dependence on Constantinople.

In a letter from Muhammed Emin Bahadir, the Khan of Khiva, to the Sultan of Turkey dated 22 June 1848, we read that the Central Asians did indeed feel themselves to be subjects of the Porte: “we always consider Your Grace as our sovereign and will do everything what you wish or what you ask from us; the Muslims have no other authority but you to ask for help for their problems” (in Saray, 2003: 288). In turn, the Porte responded that he considered the khanates and khans “as [his] brothers” (20 August 1848, in Saray, 2003: 289).⁵ Even the Turkmens who were politically acephalous and constantly fighting against the suzerainty of Khiva and Bukhara recognized the prestige of the Porte. Hungarian turkologist and traveler Ármínus Vámbéry (1868) reports a dialogue with a Turkmen, according to whom

the Tura [i.e., rule] of the Sultan of Room [a local name for Turkey] is held in high honour amongst us; first he is the prince of all the Sunnite; secondly, the Turkmens and the Osmalis [the Ottomans] have blood-relations. (p. 54)

De facto, however, the already limited power of the Sultan in that historical period was not capable of reaching those territories, of warranting them protection or of

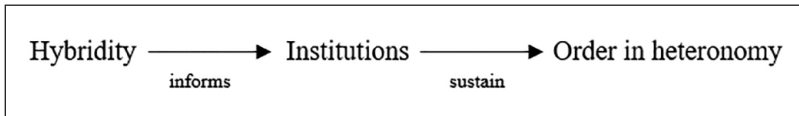


Figure 1. Hybridity, institutions, and heteronomy.

resolving disputes among the subordinates and therefore the khanates of Central Asia benefited of substantial independence while being nominally subalterns.

If sovereignty, therefore, was practiced among the khanates, a different institution was followed in relations with the smaller city-states, principalities, and the nomadic polities on the fringes of the khanates themselves. In these relations, as a matter of facts, the institution followed was a form of *suzerainty*, intended as a form of legitimate and conceded superiority manifested in the collection of tribute and in the exaction of gifts, troops, and resources (Burnes, 1834). Taxes such as the *ziaket* (on cattle) and *ikhraj* (on corn) plus *corvées* understood as seasonal, work-related tributes were levied from these polities as signs of submission to the khan, a demonstration of allegiance in exchange of protection (Michell and Michell, 1865). The khan could also ask for troops and armed soldiers when the political situation in the region demanded it.

As anticipated, we do not attest a sharp distinction between sovereign equality and suzerain domination but, conversely, we see how these two ways of relations were both present and intermingling with each other—a *heterarchical* system of *heterogeneous* polities. In other words, heteronomy. How was this possible? Keeping in mind Figure 1 above, we can understand how the khanates relied on a hybrid understanding of sovereignty, one that incorporated both Islamic and nomadic normative elements. Especially as the new dynasties of Qongrats (in Khiva), Manghits (Bukhara) and Ming (Khoqand) lacked a direct genealogical connection with Chinggis Khan, they had to justify their legitimacy through both Islamic law (Sharia) and nomadic credentials. As has been noted in the case of Khiva, for example, the Qongrat Khans still followed many nomadic dynastic customs of Chinggisid origin, which were not necessarily justified by Islamic custom. In the 19th century, “the Qongrat rulers used the same inauguration ceremony performed by nomadic rulers in the Eurasian Steppes, including Tuoba, Göktürks, Khitan, and Mongols, in which the future ruler was raised into the air upon white felt” (Sela, 2003; Shioya, 2022: 74). This aside, another hybridizing practice was that of tracing lineage back to Chinggis Khan either through marriages or, more expediently, mere fabrications (Anooshahr, 2018). Alim Khan, the founder of the Ming dynasty in Khoqand, invented a genealogical legend “tracing the origin of the Ming rulers to Babur and, through him, to Chinggis Khan” (Bregel, 2003: 401; see also Golden, 2011: 122). Even more interestingly, Khoqandian ambassadors were often present at kurultai held by Kyrgyz communities to elect their khan, as was the case with Omron Khan in the summer of 1842.

This suzerainty, however, rarely materialized in full control of the steppe and the nomadic polities surrounding the city-states, with numerous allegiances shifting and breakoffs occurring thus leading to wars and skirmishes as a result of “overlapping sovereignties” (Pickett, 2018). An example of this, which had important repercussions for

the way in which the Central Asian order unfolded and remained premised on heteronomy, was the relationship between the Kazakhs and the Russians. After having conquered much of the territory previously controlled by the Kazakh Khanate, the Tsarist troops could not secure all of the territory of the steppe (Noda, 2016: 62), with the result that, for instance, the Kazakhs of the Junior Zhuz forged patronage relations with Khiva to resist the Russian advance (Bregel, 2003: 406; Noda, 2016: 60–61; Shioya, 2022: 76) while the Senior Zhuz sided with Bukhara and Khiva in countering the northern invader (Bogaturov, 2011).

The presence and effects of the institution of sovereignty in the region, however, was particularly important when the khanates engaged with foreign powers which might have tried to impose homogeneity. For example, the respect for sovereignty asked for by the khans in dealing with the Russian is particularly evident in the words of the Khivan Kush-begi,⁶ who stated that

[o]ur lord desires that the White Tsar, according to the example of his ancestors, should not be carried away by the immensity of the empire entrusted to him by God, and *should not seek to obtain the lands of others. This is not the custom of great sovereigns.* (Terentieff, 1876: 421, emphasis added)

On the same lines, Burnaby (1876) reports how the Khivan Khan himself addressed General von Kaufmann in a private letter, saying that

from the beginning of the world to the present time there has never been an instance of one Sovereign, in order to reassure another, and for the well-being of the subjects of a foreign power, having erected a fort on the frontier, and having advanced his troops. (p. 253)

The relationship between the Qing and the Kyrgyz, conversely, was more in line with the logic of heteronomy, as for them “submission denoted recognition of a higher moral power” (Newby, 2005: 29) and not conquest or subjugation. As the Qing emperor said in an embassy to the Kyrgyz, “there is no need to adopt our ways.”

Territoriality

Moving away from sovereignty but remaining in the realm of the foundational institutions of international politics in Central Asia in the 19th century, we now turn to territoriality and boundaries. As far as the khanates are concerned, boundaries were “operationalized” by the extension of the suzerain power exerted by the khans. In both primary and secondary sources, they were defined as “shifting and imprecisely defined” (Manz, 1994: 9), as “expand[ing] or contract[ing] according to the strength or weakness of its rulers” (Khanikoff, 1845: 2), as “political fluctuations” on which “sovereignty is asserted” (Michell and Michell, 1865: 10). A partial exception is provided by Trotter (1873) who mentions two treaties to define boundaries of Bukhara, one with Afghanistan (concluded in 1789–1793 and concerning the Provinces of Chaharjui and Karki), the other one with Khoqand concluded in 1861 by the Emir and Khuda Yar Khan “at the small stream, Aghir Ak Bulak, on the road between Jizakh and Ura-tapa” (Trotter, 1873: 2; see also IOR: L/PARL/2/182 f. 128).

Furthermore, another exception is noticed by Khanikoff about Bukhara (1845: 37). In the typical orientalist and racist tone often adopted by imperial emissaries, he noted how “it strikes one as odd that in these remote and barbarous regions, as in more civilised Europe, the travellers’ first acquaintance with a country should commence with custom-house officers”. On reaching the Bokharan border town, the pilgrims were stopped, and their luggage examined with the same vexatious formalities practiced at the frontier of every European state.

In dealing with the Russian advance in their territories, the Khoqandians manifested their will to see their territory and sovereignty respected. In 1852, during the siege of Ak-Masjid, they sent an embassy to Colonel Blaramberg “to ask why the territory of Kokand was violated” arguing that “the Russians did not declare war and invaded their territory without saying that” (Beisembiev, 2008: 35).

The same framework is applicable to the other khanates. It is worth noting how for example the khanate of Khiva, when dealing with Russian troops in the 1860s to 1870s, made constant reference to boundaries and territorial infringement by the Russian troops themselves. As reported by Terentieff (in Schuyler and Grigor’ev, 1877: 422), the Khan of Khiva asked Russian troops to “promise not to cross with his troops the boundaries of my possession,” and reportedly wrote to them that “if you wish to keep up friendly relations with us, then conclude a treaty that each of us shall be contented within our lawful boundaries” (in Schuyler and Grigor’ev, 1877: 423).

Furthermore, in 1873, the Kush-begi of Khiva wrote to Russian representatives approaching Khiva militarily that

every lord rules his own lands and neither the people there, of old subject to him, nor his army *ought to cross the boundary and in this way break the peace*. Further, your statement that both sides of the [river] Syr Darya belong to your rule is apparently an infringement of previous treaties, since the southern side of the Syr Darya belongs to us. (Terentieff, 1876: 416, emphasis added)

In a subsequent letter sent by the Khan of Khiva Seid Mohammed Rahim to Russian corps, it is mentioned the important role of boundaries and of sovereignty both as a property and as a mean of protection from outside powers, as it was discussed earlier: “[. . .] your armies began to appear in various parts of our possessions. [. . .] If you desire to conclude a treaty, then remain where you are, and do not come through the inhabited districts” (Terentieff in Schuyler and Grigor’ev, 1877: 343, fn. 1).

The nomadic polities did not fully share this territorial commitment. On a very general level, their way of breeding cattle, their management of pastures according to seasonal periods and their need to move from one place to another cyclically to find better life conditions was in opposition to the institutionalization of territoriality (de Meyendorf, 1826: 9).

However, even if boundaries and territoriality among the nomads were not highly institutionalized, Yuri Bregel (2003) shows how somehow there were already border patrols in the steppe and among different polities, too. It was not in the interest of their rulers to delimit clear-cut and visible borders, but at the same time, they did have an idea of territoriality (see also Buzan and Little, 2000: 117). Interestingly, on the basis of

autoptic sources, Audrey Burton (1997) also mentions that in the areas where trade between nomads and sedentary polities was most lively, Kazakhs “took some interest in agriculture” (p. 410). Therefore, it may be said that the nomadic polities in the steppe and territories surrounding the khanates in Central Asia featured territoriality as a foundational institution of that specific interpolity order, although with different practices and logics of conformity. In support of this, de Meyendorf (1826: 9), while going to Bukhara from Orenburg passing through the steppe inhabited by the Kyrgyz, refers to “pillars” to delineate some boundaries, posited by local nomadic khans and meant to be meaningful for other nomadic groups and peoples coming from the oases, especially to fend off Khoqandian suzerainty (Khanikoff, 1845: 315).

The above assumes even more importance if the global processes of fundamental transformation of world order highlighted in the theoretical section are taken into consideration. Contrary to other precolonial polities (see, with respect to Latin America, Schulz, 2019) territoriality was, especially in the oases, a fully established institution of the Central Asian international order (for the northern steppes, see Costa Buranelli, 2020). Yet, this did not prevent the forceful transformation from heteronomy to modern sovereignty in the second part of the 19th century, and the progressive dispossession of indigenous rights that the Tsarist Empire first, and then the Soviet Union later, would subject Central Asia to (Morrison, 2008).

Crucially, in line with the argument developed in the theoretical section of this paper, the abovementioned analysis of territoriality is important in two respects. First, it shows that even among the nomads there was an understanding of territoriality, thus somehow disproving the idea that territoriality is an exclusively “European” feature. This is an argument which has been developed recently with respect to early modern Japan, too (Mukoyama, 2022). Second, the institution of territoriality in Central Asia is another locus where hybridity and diversity operated in informing the institutions upholding the heteronomy of the system. As a matter of fact, territoriality and nomadism coexisted in the Chinggisid tradition thanks to the idea of “ulus,” which linked specific territories to specific lineages deriving from Chinggis Khan and helped to regulate relations with settled communities by providing a sense of belonging, of “regional awareness,” and of territorial demarcation, however informal (Fragner, 2001: 347).

Islam

The third foundational institution of the Central Asian international order in the 19th century was Sunni, Hanafi Islam.⁷ Islam represented not only a common political and cultural language for the polities established in the region but functioned as an ideational and figurative boundary to delimit those who were members of the community and those who were outside it, thus building on a strong sense of identity and civilizational separation between the dar-al-Islam (“realm of Islam”) and the outside world. In this respect, Burnes (1834) argued that

as the base of the government of Bukhara is the Qur’an, and the whole community are or desire to be, considered spiritual, it will fully account for the exception on favor of the church. That engine and the state go heart in hand in Turkestan [Central Asia] and give mutual support to each other. (p. 284)

At the dawn of the 19th century, the Chinggisid rule in all the three khanates was hybridized with Islamic dynasticism (Burak, 2015). This had to do with military and geopolitical events at that time. As argued by Levi and Sela (2010),

a long series of defeats to China and Russia made it clear that the Chinggisid bloodline, which had been the key to political legitimacy in the region for some six centuries, had grown thin—Central Asians were ready to look elsewhere for capable and inspired leadership. (p. 244)

This was in line with broader transformation in political legitimacy in Eurasia, paralleling developments in the Ottoman Empire, Egypt, and Persia at that time (Zarakol, 2022). The Chinggisid element of dynasticism, as shown above when discussing sovereignty, did not fully disappear, but the direct descent from Chinggis Khan was diluted with the religious element of adherence to Sharia and Islam. Levi and Sela (2010) also refer to how at that time “religious endowments from rulers, government officials, merchants, and other sources financed thousands of mosques, madrasas, Sufi khanqahs, and other Islamic institutions, reinforcing and further expanding the Islamic cultural landscape across the region” (244). The importance of Islam for Central Asia is difficult to underestimate. As a matter of fact, one may argue that Islam was a foundational institution across the whole Eurasia. Shahab Ahmed (2015), for example, aptly speaks of a “Balkans-to-Bengal” (p. 33) complex in terms of Islamic creed, literature, and practices.

Islam was thus a source of identity, a common parameter for the good and the bad, and a behavioral code within the region. Islamic precepts and customs were also (and especially) observed in foreign policy toward the other khanates. These Islamic principles in the interpolity relations of the Central Asia system have been already touched upon, when mentioning the exogenous suzerainty exercised by the Turkish Porte in legitimizing the ruler of Bukhara in Samarkand and in the other khanates through official submission and dispatch of *firman*.

With reference to the outside power most pressing on the boundaries of the system in the 19th century, the Russian empire, the institution of Islam acted as an *imaginative boundary* defining the belonging to the regional order:

No enmity toward us persists in these regions [those of the khanates] except that of Urus-i bidin [the Russian infidel]. Now it behooves us to conduct campaigns in defence or furtherance of Islam (ghazat) as well as jihad against that worthless herd and gird our loins in hostility towards them. (Mullah Niyaz Muhammad b-Mullah quoted in Allworth, 1994: 6)

Notably, Sharia was the governing law not only in the khanates but also in the nomadic polities, where it nonetheless coexisted with the different types of customary laws adopted by the nomads, such as Adat and forms of animism and Zoroastrianism. Indeed, in a *Name-i Humayun* sent by the Turkish Sultan to Esseyid Gazi Khan, the Sovereign of Turan, already in 1787, it is written that

they [sheikhs and ulamas in Central Asia] must begin their campaign among the Kazakhs and the Kirghiz who live between Russia and Bukhara.⁸ They must prepare these Muslims for a fight against the Russians by telling them that this is a holy war. (in Saray, 2003: 253–254)

In addition, the Sultan of Turkey asked the sovereign of Bukhara as early as in 1789 to “request the Khan of Kazakh and Khirgiz people that they got to be ready to join into your army. By doing this you and other brothers will strengthen the Muslim brotherhood and do a good service for Islam” (in Saray, 2003: 269).

Sufism was also a crucial component of Islam in Central Asia, and a powerful social mechanism for hybridization and maintenance of diversity within the regional order and even beyond (Yılmaz, 2018: 278). For the argument of this paper, nowhere this is clearer than in Bukhara, where the Manghits, conscious of their non-Chinggisid origins,

synthesized Persianate models and steppe traditions within a Mujaddidī ethical consciousness [. . .]. The ideal king is still the Perso-Turkic empire builder, administrator and soldier. But to this is added the humble ascetic-scholar in the Mujaddidī tradition who walks with his head low, carrying a walking stick through the streets, gives daily lessons on exegesis and doctrine, and trains his own students in advanced Mujaddidī esoteric practices. (Ziad, 2018: 147–149)

Legitimacy of the rulers aside, Sufism permeated the intellectual, religious, and artistic life of Central Asia favoring travels, meetings of scholars, circulation of ideas and practices that, as is illustrated below, facilitated trade and diplomacy between sedentary and nomadic communities, and constituted a lingua franca in terms of intellectualism. Once again, the hybridity at the heart of this institution and the practice thereof allowed for interaction and common understandings between the different polities, thus sustaining the heteronomy of the system.

The procedural institutions of 19th-century Central Asia

Having dealt with the foundational institutions of the Central Asian system in the 19th century, the paper now moves to the procedural ones, that is to say, those institutions that facilitated and sustained the interactions between different units in heteronomy.

Trade and slavery

In Central Asia, in the 19th century, there were recognized trade routes, and trade, pervasive, and capillary, resulted in periodic fairs of merchants held at given times of the year. Trotter (1873: 50), for example, describes a huge, half-yearly fair in Tashkent, where merchants from Samarkand, Khoqand, Khiva, Bukhara and other places such as Iran and India presented and offered their goods (see also Levi, 2017). In particular, Bukhara was an epicenter of trade and commerce. The presence of markets and “Ministries of Commerce” in the khanates and the figure of the *Shakawul*, an official who had the duty to interact with foreigners and to take care of foreign trade (Trotter, 1873: 16; Schuyler and Grigor’ev, 1877) may be seen as a stronger form of institutionalization in the region, while among the nomadic polities trade was institutionalized more loosely despite the fact that it was a means of subsistence.

However, one should bear in mind that trade was the institution that, together with diplomacy and suzerainty, mostly linked the northern and western nomadic groups to the southern oases and khanates and the surrounding empires, since their economies were

highly complementary and mutually beneficial, thus favoring the persistence of heteronomy of the system from a functional perspective. In this respect, Trotter notes how Bukhara's trade was carried out with Khiva (apples and bullock hides), the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen nomadic polities (slaves, sarguja, sheep, cattle, and horse), Khoqand (dyes, silk), and of course, Russia and other neighboring polities in the east, such as the Qing Empire and Afghanistan. Often, these exchanges took places within specific trade missions on specific routes through the intermediation of nomadic groups (Noda, 2016: 248), such as the Kashgariya route when trading with the Kyrgyz (Burton, 1997: 412) or in designated emporiums, such as the town of Urgench, which in the 19th century was a proper "trade magnet" in the region where it was not uncommon to see nomadic khans wearing, for example, Bukharan silk (Muraev, 1871). Overall, between sedentary and nomadic polities, there was "very lively traffic" in commercial terms (Muraev, 1871: 147). All this points at the fundamentally circular nature of the economy in Central Asia, within which sedentary and nomadic groups exchanged and traded finished goods and raw materials in a complementary fashion thanks to their sustained interaction capacity (Buzan and Little, 2000), systemic connections and the extensive use of horses, an asset in both trade and warfare terms.

Not surprisingly, give its pervasive character in the region, Islam strongly informed practices and principles of trade, especially in dealings with non-Muslim polities. This is visible in the following passage, which reports a letter signed in Safara, fourth day, 1283 (1866 ca.), written by Sied Mahomed Khudoyar Khan:

[W]e Mussulmen, guided by our spiritual laws, take dues from every one [. . .] at the rate of one from forty, neither more nor less, for it would be contrary to the *Shariat* [in the original]. *I do not know your laws and customs* [. . .]. We Mussulmen shall never violate terms of peace if they only conform with our *Shariat* and "Sunna"; but we have no knowledge whatever of your laws and customs, of your conditions of trade [. . .] (reported in Terentieff, 1876: Appendix C–Ci, emphasis added)

Furthermore, as anticipated above, Sufism was also a powerful mechanism for linking sedentary and nomadic groups in the region. As reported by travelers and archeologists from the 19th century, Sufi scholars were often traveling with caravans and expeditions to negotiate safe passage and tolls with nomadic khans and authorities (Ziad, 2018: 139). The opposite was also true, in the sense that enhanced trade across the steppe and the settled communities favored the circulation of Islamic precepts. For example, various scholars have demonstrated "how the Kazakh steppe experienced an economic revival in the 19th century, which manifested itself in an increase of Islamic institutions and an intensification in the circulation and consumption of Islamic literature" (Sartori, 2016: 119).

A derivative institution of trade was slavery. Slavery and the commerce of slaves were a legitimate business and an institutionalized social practice in 19th-century Central Asia. The commerce of slaves in Central Asia was centripetal, that is to say, from the peripheral boundaries where nomadic populations lived, to the khanates.

A detailed and precise account of the institutionalization of slavery (and the commerce of slaves) can be found in the narrative of Perovsky (Archives of the Orenburg Corps, 1867). Also, according to Ármínius Vámbéry (1868), "*custom* has raised their

detestable occupation to the rank of a *recognised trade*” (p. 209, emphasis added). This kind of commerce was so institutionalized that Khivan slave dealers had their own guild, the Dogmafurush (Vámbery, 1868: 217), which regulated dealings, prices, and exchanges of slaves with other polities and merchants in periodic fairs and markets. Apart from generating revenue, slaves were also commonly used during military campaigns and wars, for they provided manpower at cheap price (Ker, 1874).

Once again, Islam played an important part, although not exclusive, in the definition of the institution of slavery. Indeed, slavery was accepted in the region of Central Asia as a social institution as many of the slaves were often, in the light of their sellers, infidels, or Shias who in the light of their doctrinal positions were placed outside the Umma. Also, the commerce of Persian slaves was legitimized by Sunnite lawyers, thus providing a stronger legal foundation for this institution.

Diplomacy

Both between the khanates and between the khanates and the nomadic polities, diplomatic relations were rather structured and frequent (Allworth, 1990: 85). This frequent use of diplomacy and its institutionalization was a function of two different factors: the fact that diplomacy was somehow an instrument of the personalization of the state and second, the fact that due to the low salience of borders and territories in the region, plus the institutionalization of suzerainty outside the realm of the khanates, frequent contacts among the elites were requested to settle disputes and find agreements over contested issues.

Of particular importance are Allworth’s words on diplomacy in Central Asia: diplomacy, at that time,

was a metaphor for sovereignty in Central Asia. Occasionally, Central Asian potentates abused visiting envoys, but generally these governments revered diplomacy because it validated their independent status. Diplomacy also, however, raised the problem of parity: how to compensate for inequality or lack of reciprocity between states. [. . .] Central Asian rulers who participated in diplomatic exchanges aspired to recognition and permanence in their sovereign roles and wanted to impress the rulers they dealt with. (Allworth, 1990: 85, emphasis added)

A clear example of this was the embassy sent to Haydar, the Emir of Bukhara, from Omar Khan, the first Khan of the newly independent Khanate of Khoqand. This embassy was sent to symbolize both his new status as a sovereign and to show his ability to entertain independent, foreign relations on behalf of the Khanate, which he represented. This embassy is particularly important since the Khanate of Khoqand was born out of the Khanate of Bukhara itself in 1709, to finally declare itself a sovereign polity in 1805 under Alimbek Khan (Babajanov, 2010; Levi, 2017).

Three were the specific characteristics of Central Asian diplomacy. First of all, diplomacy in Central Asia was based on *reverence*, and not necessarily on *equality*. This was a legacy of the steppe culture. Diplomacy was performed through presents, gifts and homages to the sovereign. Indeed, according to Terentieff (in Schuyler and Grigor’ev, 1877: 262) “one of [the] usages [of diplomacy in Central Asia] is that of giving and

receiving presents.” Furs, porcelain, cut glass, watches and guns were gifts recorded as part of embassies. Such gifts were exchanged among the khans in the region and between nomadic and sedentary khans as well, thus proving one more time the tight interconnect-edness of the system. In a letter of Muhammad Amin Khan from his military campaign to Merv (present-day Turkmenistan) in 1855, for example, we read that “every day there are arriving reports and gifts, that are proper for the dignity of our eternal state, from the governors and chieftains of the surrounding areas.” The reverence to the Khan, even if among equals, was particularly evident in the diplomatic material exchanged between them. In a letter sent by Amir Haydar of Bukhara to the Khan of Khiva asking for friend-ship and peace in the early-19th century, we read the following: “When the fame of his majesty’s power and greatness spread all over the world, the rulers of surrounding coun-tries wanted to ask for his protection” (in Schuyler and Grigor’ev, 1877: 536). The rever-ence is evident also in the appeal to the addressee: “as sublime as heaven, as mighty as Iskandar, as magnificent as Sulayman.” From there, it followed the usual and already discussed tradition of exchanging gifts and of kissing the royal carpet when called in front of the sovereign.

A second characteristic of Central Asian diplomacy was the absence of permanent representatives. Envoys were usually sent for specific missions and specific purposes but were not granted the right to stay over the host territory in the same manner as a European embassy or mission. This fact is to be found in the “autoptic” description of the region provided by Trotter (1873), who argued that “the present political state of Central Asia can be well compared to that of Europe before the sixteenth century, when the custom of having Ambassadors at Foreign Courts was still unknown” (p. 57).

Third, diplomacy was very much informed by Islamic precepts, as anticipated above. In the translation of Munis’s *History of Khorezm* (1999), an authentic manuscript narrat-ing the political and “international” history of Khiva in the 19th century, it is possible to read how the khans called each other “brother,” with the intent to show the shared kin-ship with the larger family of believers, the *Umma*.

Another telling example of the pervasive presence of Islam in Central Asian diplo-macy in the 19th century is the support found in the Quran when managing foreign affairs. For example, again in Munis’s *History of Khorezm*, we read that in the early 1820s, the Tekke nomads of Merv were committing several raids and plunders against Khiva. The Khivan Khan, Muhammad Rahim, sought reparation and, in doing this, also sought joint action with Bukhara. This action was based, the contemporary author reports, on Quran III, 159: “And take counsel with them [brothers] in the affairs.” Following this, an official embassy was sent to Bukhara. Interestingly, the same expres-sion with almost the same wording is found in Bukhara later in time (Enclosures to Secret Letters from India, Political and Secret Mem. 5/60, India Office).

The institution of diplomacy contributed to the diversity and hybridization of the Central Asian regional order, too, thus substantiating its heteronomy. Far from creating specific identities and functional categories with exclusive rights in terms of who was allowed to carry out diplomatic functions, official representatives of khans, traders, mer-chants, messengers, Sufi scholars, and other actors performed diplomatic functions across the whole region. Building on this, the diversity of the region was held together and stabilized by settled-nomadic marriages, which on one hand were used by the ruling

khans of Khiva, Bukhara, and Khoqand to find a lineage back to Chinggis Khan, and on the other hand laid the ground for coexistence, mutual support, loyalty, and suzerainty. The Kazakhs of the Junior Zhuz, for example, practiced marriages with Khivan khans to forge ties to resist Russia's progressive advance throughout the steppe, especially after having conquered much of the Kazakh khanate by the first half of the 19th century (Shioya, 2022: 76). This often resulted in the bestowment of titles, too, and honors. For example, the Kazakh leader Šir Ğāzī "held pastures stretching from the Syr to Quvan Rivers, and he was appointed Khan of the 'western Kazakhs' by Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān in 1818 [. . .]. After his death, he was buried at the mausoleum of Pahlavān Maḥmūd in Khiva" (Shioya, 2022: 76).

With respect to possible derivative institutions such as alliances and concerts, an analysis of historical records indicates few examples thereof.

Timur Beisembiev, in his magisterial *Annotated indices to the Kokhand chronicles*, reports that in 1821, a coordinated action between Khiva and Khoqand took place against the emir of Bukhara, Haydar, willing to extend his suzerainty on the neighboring territories contested by the other two khanates (Beisembiev, 2008: 16; see also Beisembiev, 2013). Going back to regional clashes, Wolff (1845: 164) tells us about a momentary alliance between Khiva and Khoqand against Bukhara in the 1840s, but further examples of a logic of balance of power in play could not be found in the sources I consulted. With respect to the Russian advancement in the region, Trotter (1873: 180) refers to a diplomatic audition to Omar Khan (in Khoqand) with Colonel Nazarov, in 1813–1814, with envoys also from Khiva and Bukhara. Burnes (1834: 25), in a letter of 20th October 1837, mentions an intercession of Bukhara between Khiva and Russia in 1835, concerted also with the khan of Khoqand. Perovsky mentions troops from Khoqand helping the Khivans in the 1839 campaign (quoted in Archives of the Orenburg Corps 1867: 180), while Allworth (1994) mentions also the presence of Kazakh and Turkmen nomads (13).

While Trotter (1873: 70) again notes that Bukhara went to help Khoqand against Russia with substantive troops in the 1860s, Skrine and Ross refer to several instances of alliances and provisional joint actions between the nomads and the khanates against the invader. Indeed, they also report of a coalition of the three khanates against Russia in the 1860s led by Sayyid Muzaffar ed-Dir, since "a sense of common danger united the forces which had hitherto been hostile" (Skrine and Ross, 1899: 250 and *passim*). However, such arrangements proved to be only temporary, and were not the result of a formalized procedure or mechanism (Allworth, 1994: 47).

War

In Central Asia wars often broke out of opportunities for territorial conquest, necessity to punish polities which either defied suzerainty, shifted their loyalties to another khan, damaged the interests and wealth of the sovereign (e.g. by disrupting trade or taking slaves, or both) or because of the need to entrench domestic legitimacy and display power, competence, and authority. The salience and pervasive nature of war in 19th-century Central Asia was also due to elements of Mongol legitimacy of rule, which despite being blended with and superseded by Islam did not fully disappear. Rather, as noted above, the evolution one could observe was from pure Chinggidism to

“Timuridism,” blending elements of Turkic nomadic legitimacy with Islam (Levi, 2017). In light of the presence of this Mongol legitimacy elements based on primacy and uncontested rule, as well as expansion and universal sovereignty (Zarakol, 2022), conflict was always a possibility in Central Asia, especially when suzerain relations shifted, and new khans were installed (see, e.g., Dubovitskii and Bababekov, 2014; Şen, 2021).

Furthermore, war was very much linked to Islam, and *shaped* by as well as *in tension* with it. In particular, the practice to burn and devastate fields and meadows was openly against the Islamic law, specifically when they belonged to Muslims (Babajanov, 2010: 253). A striking example of this is a memory held by de Meyendorff, who during his mission in Central Asia tells us how in the early 1810s, Khiva

was taken possession of by Emir Hayder [of Bukhara], but from religious scruples he gave it back its independence, as the Koran forbids true believers from taking or conquering one another's possessions without good cause [. . .]. The Emir ul Mumini [Commander of Believers] believes that to destroy Khiva would be to destroy a member of the whole family to which he belongs. (de Meyendorff, 1826: 57; see also Howorth, 1876: 924)

In a further testimony to how the institution of war was constantly intertwined with Islamic precepts, the Russian explorer Muraev (1871) reports how “religion does not hold back against ‘brothers’, but once back home [fighters] repent by fasting, prayers, and ablutions” (p. 164).⁹ Furthermore, in Munis’s *History of Khorezm*, we read that the release of prisoners following conflict was based on religious considerations. The dictate that governed the release of prisoners was based on Quran LXXXIV, 9, “and he will return to his family joyfully.” In fact, this Quranic precept was at the center of a derivative institution of war in Central Asia, that of *aq oyluk*. An *aq oyluk* was a person placed in the custody of another government “as a sign of submission and a guarantee that the party that lost in the conflict would abide by the conditions of the treaty or would not rebel” (Munis, 1999: 641, fn. 963).

War, however disruptive, was premised on heteronomy and contributed to it once again through hybridizing elements—material, strategic, and ideational. First, military campaigns in Central Asia “were based on cavalry units, comparable even to the steppe empires of antiquity, but also on the adoption of new gunpowder technology” (Pickett, 2016: 10), thus synthesizing the steppe tradition with elements coming from the neighboring empires. For example, the Bukharan Emir Nasrullah “aggressively incorporated Russian- and Iranian-trained artillery into his military” (ibidem). The same was observed in Khoqand, where ammunitions and military equipment from the Tsarist empire was used to fight the Qing in Xinjiang (Golden, 2011: 122). Second, the institution of war was premised on the balance between two coexisting modes of living, the nomadic one based on redistribution and the settled one based on accumulation:

While aspiring towards a centralized sedentary organization, which would allow them to levy taxes, establish an institutionalized bureaucracy and obviate the succession struggle, [the khanates] were still dependent for their military strength, and hence security, on the good-will and cooperation of tribes who generally adhered to the Turko-Mongolian steppe values. (Newby, 2005: 30, fn. 30)

Conclusion

Through secondary sources and primary documents, research for this paper identified a regional interpolity order in 19th-century Central Asia, supported by the following institutions with indigenous characteristics: sovereignty between the khanates and suzerainty between khanates and nomadic polities; territoriality; Sunni Islam; trade and slavery; diplomacy; and war and *aq oyluk*.

The regional order existing in 19th-century Central Asia was diverse, heteronomical, and in contemporary parlance “neo-medieval”—different polities and centers of power oscillated between sovereignty and suzerainty almost constantly, with war and diplomacy structuring this oscillation. It presented variety, pluralism, and contingency, and was premised on the coexistence between Islamic and Turco–Persian steppe values mediated by the institutions identified above. As Pickett (2018) has rightly argued, “this specificity helps us move from premodern sovereignty as an implicitly residual category, gesturing toward anything other than the Westphalian variety, to myriad manifestations of the phenomenon intersecting in different times and places” (p. 844). Also, the interpolity order present in 19th-century Central Asia was primarily power-political and marked by conflict, but featured also strong elements of mutual obligations, shared understandings, common practices, and overarching identities, which facilitated coexistence and “oiled the wheels” of systemic activities. Far from being an ahistorical area on which imperial dynamics unfolded, Central Asia was in itself a working interpolity order with logics of cooperation, conflict, and belonging, with the support of institutions such as trade, diplomacy, religion, and war that, without neglecting their local specificities, are functionally relatable to the vast majority of social contexts in the past (Schouenborg, 2016).

The paper, lying at the intersection between Historical IR, Global Historical Sociology, and ES, and combining hybridity, institutions, and heteronomy in a single analytical framework, investigated if and how a diverse, plural, and hybrid interpolity order was conceived and played out in Central Asia in the 19th century. By departing from a high-altitude analysis, the paper assigned agency to smaller Eurasian polities located at the heart of the diverse macro-regional order looking at their specificities and indigenous processes and institutions. Furthermore, by doing so, it addressed the call made by Phillips and Sharman (2015b: 222–224) for more comparative cases of “order in diversity,” thus substantiating the case for considering heteronomy as “the rule” historically and focusing also on elements of similarity with Europe, used in this study as “shadow case.”

The hope is that this research will spur additional interest in historical Central Asia, not just as part of broader Eurasia and the Turkic–Persian world, but also on its own as an area where IR cannot only be applied, but can also learn—about new institutions, concepts, and practices. Global IR may not be built in one day. Yet, also understanding how Bukhara, Khiva, Khoqand, and all the nomadic polities surrounding them managed their diversity and lived in precolonial times may well help toward it.

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Notes

1. However analytically helpful, I am not fully comfortable with the use of the term “neo-medieval,” for it brings back Eurocentric categories of analysis. The use of the term here should be understood in the way that Hedley Bull (1977) used it, that is as an ideal-type about complex, overlapping and incomplete sovereignties.
2. The literature on heteronomy and the coexistence of anarchy and hierarchy is indeed quite complex. See, for example, Lake (1996); Mcconaughey et al. (2018); Bially Mattern and Zarakol (2016). For a recent analytical refinement, see Butcher and Griffiths (2022).
3. The territory of what is today known as Kazakhstan was, in the 19th century, inhabited by a confederation of families, or Zhuses, which formally constituted the Kazakh Khanate. Yet, already in the 18th century, the power of this confederation started to decline due to conflicts with Dzungars and Oirats, with the consequence that parts of it started pledging allegiance to the Tsarist Empire, while the southern elements strengthened relations with the khanates in the oases.
4. When not using the emic, original titles when quoting primary sources, the titles mentioned are as they appear in the referenced secondary literature.
5. The use of the word “brother” is interesting, for the existing literature tells us that suzerainty is typically conceived in father–son relations, whereas recognition as mutuals has typically worked on the level of lateral fraternity (Haugevik and Neumann, 2019). While the paper cannot unpack this in detail, it can be nonetheless hypothesized that the “brotherhood” mentioned here is that within the religious family of the Umma, and not the ethnic or political one of khanates, nomadic polities, and empires. After all, also the *Verse of Brotherhood* (Āyat al-Ukhuwwah) in Quran, XL, 10, specifies that “the believers are but brothers.”
6. The Kush-begi was a high-rank minister at the Khan’s court.
7. Analytically speaking, a religion may be closer to a constitutive principle than to an institution. Yet, given the pervasive role of Islam in the region and the way in which it structured and affected all other institutions, I decided to consider it as a foundational institution of the Central Asian interpolity order at that time (see also Holsti, 2009, where “religion” is framed as a foundational institution).
8. A *Name-i Humayun* was an imperial letter sent to polities bordering directly the Ottoman empire. This specific provision should be considered in conjunction with what was called above “the nominal suzerainty” that the Ottoman Empire exercised on the khanates in Central Asia.

9. This tension was certainly not unique to Islam, but to Christendom too. One may think of European religious wars for an equally valid, if not even clearer, manifestation of it!

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