



THEMATIC DOSSIER: Preserving Identity in a Global World

ТЕМАТИЧЕСКОЕ ДОСЬЕ: Сохранение идентичности в глобальном мире

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Historical Policy of Kazakhstan in the Space of Russia's Southern Border: Identity, Discourse, Commemoration Using the Example of the Astrakhan Region

Mikhail A. Volkhonskiy , Akhmet A. Yarlykapov  

MGIMO University, Moscow, Russian Federation

 itbal@mail.ru

Abstract. The article presents the findings of a study examining the implementation of the Kazakh historical policy in the socio-cultural space of the southern Russian borderland. Methodology of the study is based on concepts of the symbolic politics and the commemorative landscape of the borderlands. In the period from 1991 to 2020, the Kazakh authorities conducted an active historical policy in the Astrakhan region, which was reflected in several commemorative actions that received a loud public response. The analysis of the evolution of the Kazakh historical discourse in the period from the 1990s to the 2020s made it possible to reveal the multifaceted symbolic content of the historical policy of the Kazakh authorities projected on the Russian territory. The most significant action undertaken as part of this policy was the construction of the Bukey Khan mausoleum in Maly Aral, Astrakhan region, in 2011. The study revealed a number of symbolic objectives associated with this action: perpetuating the memory of Bukey Khan as one of the key heroes of the Kazakh pantheon of historical figures; hidden symbolic marking of that part of the Russian territory where the Bukey Khanate existed in the 19th century as Kazakh territory; symbolic confirmation of the legitimacy of the transfer to the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in the 1920s of part of the lands that were part of the Bukey Khanate; strengthening of the Kazakh identity among Kazakhs, Russian citizens living in the Astrakhan region; symbolic reformatting of the sacred space of the Karagash-Nogai people, formed around the grave of Saint Seid Baba, into the Kazakh historical and political memorial space. The ‘Kazakhization’ of this sacral complex became part of the historical policy pursued by the Kazakh authorities, which targeted the Russian Nogais. The history and culture of the Nogai people were of interest to the Kazakh authorities in the context of the struggle for the Golden Horde heritage. The symbolic “appropriation” of the Nogai historical and cultural heritage would allow closing the chronological, spatial and cultural gap in the historical and ideological construct of the “origin” of the Kazakh Khanate from the Golden Horde, since it was the Nogai Horde that was the only direct heir of the Golden Horde. Nogais also left behind a rich literary heritage in the form of epic tales, which later became widespread among Kazakhs. For symbolic “appropriation” of the Nogai

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heritage, a myth was created about the existence of a special period in Kazakh history, when in the Golden Horde there was allegedly a “Nogailin” (from the word “Nogaily” — Nogaian) ethnic community, which later disintegrated into the Nogai, Kazakhs and Karakalpaks. Currently, this myth is being actively replicated within the framework of the historical policy pursued by the Kazakh authorities.

Key words: symbolic politics, history, Bukey Khan, Golden Horde, Nogai Horde

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Историческая политика Казахстана на пространстве южного пограничья России: идентичность, дискурс и коммеморация на примере Астраханской области

М.А. Волхонский , А.А. Ярлыкапов  

МГИМО МИД России, Москва, Российская Федерация

 itbal@mail.ru

Аннотация. Представлены результаты исследования особенностей реализации казахской исторической политики в пространстве российского пограничья. Методологию исследования составляют концепты символической памяти и «ландшафта памяти» пограничья. В 1991–2020 гг. власти Казахстана проводили в Астраханской области активную историческую политику, что выразилось в ряде коммеморативных акций, имевших общественный резонанс. Анализ эволюции казахского исторического дискурса в 1990–2020-е гг. позволил раскрыть многоплановое символическое содержание исторической политики властей Казахстана, спроецированной на российскую территорию. Ключевой акцией такой политики стало возведение в 2011 г. мавзолея Букей-хана в селе Малый Арал в Астраханской области. В ходе исследования было выявлено несколько символических целей акции: увековечивание памяти о Букей-хане как одном из ключевых героев казахского пантеона исторических личностей; скрытое символическое маркирование той части российской территории, где в XIX в. существовало Букеевское ханство, как казахской территории; символическое подтверждение правомерности передачи Казахской ССР в 1920-е гг. части земель, входивших в состав Букеевского ханства; укрепление казахской идентичности у казахов, граждан России, проживающих в Астраханской области; символическое переформатирование сакрального пространства ногайцев-карагашей, сформировавшегося вокруг могилы святого Сеид-Бабы, в казахское историко-политическое мемориальное пространство. «Казахизация» этого сакрального комплекса стала частью исторической политики, проводимой властями Казахстана в отношении российских ногайцев. История и культура ногайцев интересна казахстанским властям в контексте борьбы за золотоордынское наследие. Выявлено, что символическое «присвоение» ногайского историко-культурного наследия позволило бы закрыть хронологическую, пространственную и культурную брешь в историко-идеологическом конструкте «происхождения» Казахского ханства от Золотой Орды, поскольку именно Ногайская Орда являлась единственным прямым наследником Золотой Орды. Ногайцы также оставили после себя богатое литературное наследие в виде эпических сказаний, которые позднее получили широкое распространение среди казахов. С целью символического «присвоения» ногайского наследия был создан миф о существовании в казахской истории особого периода, когда в Золотой Орде якобы существовала «ногайлинская» (от слова «ногайлы» — ногайский) этническая общность, которая позже распалась на ногайцев, казахов и каракалпаков. Доказано, что в настоящее время этот миф активно тиражируется в рамках проводимой казахстанскими властями исторической политики.

Ключевые слова: символическая политика, история, Букей-хан, Золотая Орда, Ногайская Орда

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Introduction:

The Conceptual Framework of the Study

This article explores Kazakhstan's official politics of memory in the Russian region of Astrakhan. Methodologically, the study draws on concepts such as the politics of memory (historical politics or symbolic politics) and the commemorative landscape of the borderlands. The definition of the symbolic politics generally used in the Russian literature was proposed by O.Yu. Malinova. She defines the phenomenon as “activities aimed at creating different ways to interpret social reality and struggle for ensuring their dominance” (Malinova, 2018, pp. 30–31). The symbolic politics that centres on the past is called ‘politics of memory’ its object being the cultural memory of society — an array of historical events, figures and symbols selected according to a specific rationale (Assman, 2014, pp. 20–21, 30–34). A.I. Miller defines the historical politics as involving “the use of public administrative and financial resources in the domains of history and the politics of memory to advance the interests of the ruling elite” (Miller, 2012, p. 19).

The nature of historical politics crucially depends on its geographical scope. Within their jurisdictions, authorities often strive to establish a unified cultural memory of the past among the population, laying the foundation for a shared identity. When extended to another state, the historical politics pursue an opposite goal. In borderlands, the historical politics presents a unique case where commemorative landscapes comprise a complex of historical and cultural artefacts from diverse ethnicities,

religions, and cultures. These landscapes serve as a tangible foundation for the historical memories of the local populace (Kolosov, 2018, pp. 27–28).

Artefacts comprising the commemorative landscape of borderlands may elicit positive and negative emotional responses from different segments of the population, who strive to eliminate negatively perceived artefacts while increasing the presence of positively perceived ones. This effect is achieved, among other things, by changing toponyms, dismantling old memorials, erecting new ones, and installing commemorative plaques.

The situation in borderlands can be described as the “encroachment of memorials on borders” or the projection of a state's historical politics onto the border areas of a neighbouring country (Kolosov, 2018, pp. 100–101). In pursuing these actions, a state typically seeks to achieve two distinct objectives. First, it aims to symbolically claim the neighbour's territory as its own. Second, it seeks to exert influence over the other country's nationals, whom it considers to be compatriots. The historical and cultural artefacts of borderland commemorative landscapes represent a valuable resource in this process.

The Astrakhan region is a prime example of such borderlands as it has been exposed to the historical politics of Russia's southern neighbours — Azerbaijan, Georgia, Armenia and Kazakhstan — since the 1990s.

In order to gain insight into Kazakhstan's historical politics, we have structured our exploration around five key questions:

- What action was central to Kazakhstan’s historical politics?
- Who was the principal actor?
- What past events were reconstructed, and in what manner?
- What were the motives and goals of the actor?
- How did the social environment and other actors react to these efforts?

The study drew on various sources, including research monographs, articles, and opinion pieces by Kazakhstani authors, which cast light on Kazakhstan’s political discourse. Additionally, it considered media publications and data collected through in-depth interviews conducted on the ground.

The Erection of the Bukey Khan Memorial as an Act of Kazakhstan’s Historical Politics

Since 1992, Kazakhstan has pursued historical political initiatives in the Astrakhan region, erecting several memorials dedicated to the talented Kazakh folk musician and composer Kurmangazy Sagyrbaev. These initiatives did not provoke conflicts, as K. Sagyrbaev is held in high regard in both countries (Kulikova, 2011, pp. 206–229). Yet, the opening of the Bukey Khan mausoleum near the village of Maly Aral in the Krasnoyarsk district of Astrakhan Oblast on October 12, 2011, gave rise to a conflict of symbols.

The decision of the Kazakh government to select Bukey Khan as a symbolic figure for their historical political initiatives in Russia was perfectly logical. As the press service of the Astrakhan regional administration stated, the mausoleum was erected “on the instructions of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev, who considered Bukey Khan an outstanding personality.”¹ One of the younger sons of Nuraly Khan, Bukey

(alternatively spelt “Bokey”) headed the Lesser Jüz’s council of khans from 1798 until 1805. In February 1801, he appealed to Emperor Paul I through the mediation of Lieutenant-General K.F. Knorring, the Russian commander-in-chief of the Caucasian Line, requesting permission to migrate with some Kazakhs of the Lesser Jüz to the unsettled lands between the Volga and Ural (Yaik) rivers, earlier (until 1771) inhabited by the Trans-Volga Kalmyks. Upon receiving permission, Bukey and his brother Shigai, accompanied by subject Kazakh households (183 kubitkas), settled in the new land. Subsequently, approximately 5,000 more Kazakh kubitkas followed.²

Most Russian historians argue that the Bukey Khanate (also known as the Interior Horde) never enjoyed an independent statehood and should not be regarded as a successor to the Lesser Jüz. Having had considerable internal autonomy for four decades, it remained subordinate to Russia in administrative and political terms. The territory in which the khanate emerged was a constituent part of the Russian Empire, and the khan was in the service of the emperor. Nevertheless, the khanate played a prominent role in the historical development of the region, contributing to the strengthening of Kazakh-Russian cultural and socioeconomic ties (Bykov, 2002; Pochekaev, 2011; Vasilyev, 2015; Semenova, 2018; Syzranov, 2021).

Contemporary Kazakhstani historical discourse offers an entirely different interpretation of the role of the Bukey Khanate, placing emphasis on Bukey Khan’s contribution to the “preservation of Kazakh statehood.” For example, A.T. Abdulina writes: “Having been granted permission of the Russian Empire to reign as a khan, Bokey Khan prolonged the life of the khanate

¹ In Astrakhan Region, Kazakh Khan Mausoleum Opens // Vysota 102 News Agency. October 14, 2011. (In Russian). URL: <https://v102.ru/news/29724.html?ysclid=la0tw0051t125814339> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

² History of the Bukey Khanate. 1801–1852 : Collection of Documents and Materials / comp. by B. T. Janayev, V. A. Inochkin, S. Kh. Sagnaeva. Almaty : Daik-Press publ., 2002. P. 28–31. (In Russian).

institution within the empire, whilst, in the Kazakh-ruled jüzs, khanate had been abolished by the end of the first quarter of the 19th century ... The foundation of the Inner Horde paved the way for including most of it in the Kazakh SSR in 1920” (Abdulina, 2019, pp. 504–505). A Kazakhstani middle-school history textbook reads as follows: “The foundation of the Interior Horde, or Bokey Khanate, played a major role in the history of the Kazakh people. Through the endeavours of certain Kazakhs from the Lesser Jüz, it became possible to settle a portion of traditional Kazakh territories on the right bank of the Ural River and subsequently defend them.”³

Quite predictably, at the unveiling of the Bukey Khan mausoleum on October 12, 2011, the Kazakhstani ambassador to Russia said: “Khan Bokey was the founder of a new polity that subsequently became part of a unified Kazakh state. Having founded the Bokey Horde in the interfluvium of the Ural and Volga rivers, he extended the boundaries of Kazakh polities. The significance of this memorial extends beyond the present generation; it also serves to educate future generations about their history...”⁴

How to Create a Kazakh Nation? Between the Concept of a Civil Nation and Nationalist Discourse

The most striking aspect of Kazakhstan’s Bukey Khan mausoleum initiative was the amount of funding, which was approximately 17 million roubles. The 19-metre memorial, constructed over the course of approximately one year, was lavishly adorned with expensive

materials.⁵ Such expenditure required strong motives, which can be traced back to the prevailing historical discourse in Kazakhstan.

Following the disintegration of the USSR, the authorities of independent Kazakhstan were faced with the necessity of formulating a revised version of the country’s historical narrative, one that would diverge from the Soviet era account. Historical studies, which focused on Kazakh ethnogenesis and the formation of the Kazakh state had several distinctive features: firstly, the history of Kazakhs traced to ancient times (the ‘Kazakhification’ of ancient Central Asian ethnicities and states); secondly, the absolutisation of the role of “external threats,” regardless of whether coming from the Dzungar Khanate or Russia (they are treated as the principal obstacle to the development of the Kazakh ethnicity and Kazakh statehood); thirdly, the denouncement of the periods when the Kazakhs were subjects of the Russian Empire and, later, the USSR (Sembinov, 2003, p. 188; Masanov, Abylkhozhin & Yerofeeva, 2007, pp. 154–156, 182–183, 198–200; Kundakbayeva, 2009, p. 265).

It may seem paradoxical, but during the first two decades of Kazakhstan’s independence, this political discourse was sharply at odds with the official national policy. In his 1998 programme article, *Cherishing Memory, Promoting Concord*, N.A. Nazarbayev set out the official perspective on history as a fundamental tool for preserving the unity of the country’s diverse population (Sembinov, 2003, pp. 182–183). This policy was warranted by the complex ethnic and demographic situation in Kazakhstan at the time of the Soviet Union’s disintegration. The country’s two major ethnic groups were Kazakhs and Russians, numbering 6.5 and 6.2 million, respectively (Smirnova, 2019, p. 210). Kazakhstan officially rejected terms such as

³ Kabuldinov Z. E., Kaiypbaeva A. T. *History of Kazakhstan (18th Century — 1914): Textbook for the 8th Grade of Secondary School*. Almaty: Atamura publ., 2012. P. 87. (In Russian).

⁴ Suleimenova L. Mausoleum Erected over Bokey Khan’s Grave // *Ak Jaiyk Weekly Newspaper*. October 14, 2011. (In Russian). URL: <https://azh.kz/ru/news/view/7556> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

⁵ Ibid.

‘titular nation’ or ‘national minority,’ emphasizing the primacy of citizenship over that of ethnicity (Kundakbayeva, 2009, p. 267).

Nevertheless, Kazakhstan’s policy towards a cohesive Kazakhstani civil nation remained limited to embellishing official speeches with correspondent rhetoric, which was much in disagreement with the country’s nascent nationalist-driven historical discourse. The myriads of school and university textbooks published since the 2000s serve as further evidence that the process of building a civil Kazakhstani nation was largely imitative.⁶ These books feature well-established Kazakh-centred myths about the antiquity of the Kazakh ethnicity, the “five thousand years of Kazakh statehood” and the negative role that the Russian Empire and the USSR had in the history of the Kazakhs, among others (Kundakbayeva, 2009, pp. 274, 277–278). The prevalence of this discourse in the pages of school and university textbooks could not but complicate the creation of a cohesive civil nation. It is sufficient to note that the status of descendants of the Kazakh nation’s alleged “colonisers” and “oppressors” is accorded to Russians residing in present-day Kazakhstan.

Nevertheless, Kazakhstan’s officials did not immediately reject the civil nation project. The 2000s witnessed an attempt to merge the idea of a civil nation with the established Kazakh-centred historical discourse. In April 2003, President N.A. Nazarbayev presented the Cultural Heritage programme in his state of the nation address (Shelegina & Zhetpisbaev, 2020, p. 283). The principal goal of the initiative, which was approved in 2004, was the systematic study of the cultural heritage of the people of Kazakhstan, along with the restoration of all major historical, cultural and architectural

monuments having profound significance for national history.⁷ The concept of heritage, intended to establish a strong material foundation for Kazakhstani civil national identity, draws from the ideas of the renowned French historian Pierre Nora, particularly his concept of the ‘site of memory’ (Nora, 1999). From 2004 to 2013, 40 archaeological and 26 applied studies were carried out within the programme, alongside restoration efforts at 73 archaeological sites and architectural monuments.⁸

As the programme progressed, the objective of creating a cohesive civil nation in Kazakhstan was relegated to the background, overshadowed by the goal of deepening the historical roots of Kazakh ethnicity. The programme did not discriminate between world heritage monuments physically located in Kazakhstan and commemorative sites of Kazakh ethnic history. In June 2008, President N.A. Nazarbayev declared Kazakhstan the “cradle of the Great civilisation of the steppe,” requesting that the “golden treasures” of Kazakhstani statehood — the Issyk kurgans, Berel, Turkistan and Otrar, Ulytau and Sarayshyk — be restored and revered as national symbols.⁹ In his speech, Nazarbayev suggested that the primary objective of the programme was to designate exclusively

⁷ Message from the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. A. Nazarbayev to the People of Kazakhstan. April 2003 // The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan official website. (In Russian). URL: https://www.akorda.kz/ru/addresses/addresses_of_president/postanie-prezidenta-respubliki-kazakhstan-n-a-nazarbaevanarodu-kazakhstan-aprel-2003-g_1342416495 (accessed: 16.08.2023).

⁸ Karamanova M. S. Kazakhstan’s Cultural Heritage State Programme: Stages of Its Implementation and Significance // Qazaqstan Tarihy. October 1, 2013. (In Russian). URL: <https://e-history.kz/ru/first-president/show/12378> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

⁹ Cultural Heritage State Programme: N. Nazarbayev Set the Task of Accelerating the Collection of Historical Data About Ancient Kazakhs // CentrAsia. June 14, 2008. (In Russian). URL: <https://centrAsia.org/newsA.php?st=1213427220&ysclid=ljy2jkyg1p384215801> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

⁶ Volkova T. P. How Kazakhstani Textbooks Teach Tolerance // Russkie.org. January 11, 2008. (In Russian). URL: <https://russkie.org/articles/kak-uchat-tolerantnosti-kazakhskie-uchebniki-istorii/?ysclid=ljwrzg2lt6335350890> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

Kazakh the world heritage sites located within the country, including the artefacts belonging to the cultures of ancient and medieval Eurasian nomads, as well as those crafted by the ancient and medieval urban civilisations of Central Asia.

Another objective of the programme was the restoration of the heritage assets of the Kazakh Khanate. In June 2008, President Nazarbayev noted: “In the Soviet era, the state strived to eliminate any memory of the historical roots of the Kazakhs, destroying the mausoleums and tombs of khans Yesim, Tauke and Jahangir, *batyrs* Bogenbay, Janibek, Jaugash and Koigeldy, and Kazybek Biy. Our sacred duty is to restore and revive these burials.”¹⁰ The expensive construction of the Bukey Khan mausoleum in 2010 and 2011 was a logical extension of the Cultural Heritage programme, which sought to establish a pantheon of Kazakh historical figures.

In 2018, President N.A. Nazarbayev published another programmatic article entitled *The Seven Facets of the Great Steppe*, which gave official status to the Kazakh nationalist discourse.¹¹ The introduction to the article established a formula for nationalist primordialist teleology. Firstly, it declared the Kazakhs to be an eternal nation that had existed from times immemorial as the Saka, the Huns, the Cumans, and other ethnic groups. Secondly, the foundation of Kazakhstan was named the ultimate goal of all historical processes that had taken place in the lands now belonging to the country: all ancient and medieval nomadic states were thus arranged in a direct genealogical line,

¹⁰ Cultural Heritage State Programme: N. Nazarbayev Set the Task of Accelerating the Collection of Historical Data About Ancient Kazakhs // *CentrAsia*. June 14, 2008. (In Russian). URL: <https://centrasia.org/newsA.php?st=1213427220&ysclid=ljy2jkyg1p384215801> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

¹¹ Nazarbayev N.A. *Seven Facets of the Great Steppe* // *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*. November 21, 2018. (In Russian). URL: <http://elib.kstu.kz/fulltext/temat/Sem%60%20graney%20Velikoy%20stepi.pdf> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

which “objectively” led to modern Kazakh statehood. Thirdly, all cultural and technological achievements of the ethnic groups and states that had ever existed on the territory of today’s Kazakhstan were proclaimed as Kazakh accomplishments.

The actual history, however, does not conform to simplistic ideological frameworks. Various collisions arise immediately when, for example, a segment of the state’s population fails to fit into the reconstructed narrative of the ethnic group/nation/state’s origin, when contemporary national borders diverge significantly from those of ancient precursor states, or when sizeable groups of ethnically related populations reside beyond present boundaries. It is precisely such collisions that prompt the authorities of countries embracing a nationalist discourse to intensify historical politics initiatives within their borders and extend these efforts to neighbouring states.

However, the Kazakhstani authorities endeavoured to integrate the notion of a civil nation with the prevailing Kazakh nationalist historical discourse. Despite the outflow of the Russian populace from the country, Kazakhstan remained a multi-ethnic state. In an interview conducted in 2019, Kazakhstani political scientist Timur Kozyrev outlined the situation: “Despite Kazakhstan’s impressive accomplishments, a distinction is still made between the notions of ‘Kazakh’ and ‘Kazakhstani.’ Sometimes exploited to malicious ends, this difference manifests in that the Soviet period is still perceived as the ‘common history for all Kazakhstani citizens.’ We are no longer Soviet people, but this is clearly not enough. The Kazakh Khanate — yes, everyone recognizes and respects it, but ... this topic primarily interests ethnic Kazakhs only.”¹²

¹² The Golden Horde — The Golden Cradle: The Origins of Kazakh Statehood and Modernity // *Kazinform International News Agency*. September 4, 2019. (In Russian). URL: https://www.inform.kz/ru/zolotaya-orda-zolotaya-kolybel-istoki-kazahskoy-gosudarstvennosti-i-sovremennost_a3562397 (accessed: 16.08.2023).

In 2019, the authorities finally selected the Golden Horde era as the starting point of Kazakhstani statehood and nationhood, citing the “Golden Horde heritage” as a unifying framework for all peoples of Kazakhstan, encompassing both Turkic and Slavic.¹³ However, this approach was not without its own internal contradictions. The assertion that the Russian community could identify with the Golden Horde heritage seems doubtful. Moreover, neither the borders of the Kazakh Khanate nor the boundaries of today’s Kazakhstan encompassed the historical core of the Golden Horde. Finally, there is a chronological discrepancy between the periods of existence of the two polities.

The Symbolic Goals of the Construction of the Bukey Khan Mausoleum

In examining the situation surrounding the Bukey Khan mausoleum, it is important to acknowledge the symbolic objectives that can be discerned in this initiative when placed within the context of the evolving Kazakh historical discourse. First and foremost, the erection of the mausoleum concretised and solidified the Kazakh concept that views the Bukey Khanate as part of a “unified Kazakh state.” The memorial effectively negates the Russian perspective on the role of the khanate (the Interior Horde), which appears to align more closely with historical facts. This interpretation posits that the khanate was Russia’s unique administrative-political and sociocultural project aimed at creating optimum conditions for the peaceful and prosperous coexistence of Kazakhs in the Astrakhan province alongside Russians, Nogais and other peoples. Additionally, the memorial was intended to reaffirm the historical legitimacy of

transferring part of the former Bukey Khanate to the Kazakh SSR in 1920 and make a symbolic claim to the remaining territory now within Russia. In the late 2010s, particular emphasis was placed on the fact that the Bukey Khanate was founded in the 19th century at the historical core of the Golden Horde. Thus, the mausoleum construction served as a symbolic marking of a portion of Russian territory as Kazakh.

The initiative also targeted Russian citizens of Kazakh origin residing in the Astrakhan region, seeking to influence their identity. Therefore, it was not akin to the typical support extended by a state to its expatriate communities. As early as the late 19th century, the prominent researcher A.N. Kharuzin observed substantial differences in terms of culture, quotidian practices and mindset between the Kazakhs of the Bukey Horde and their relatives still leading a nomadic life beyond the Ural River (Kharuzin, 1889, p. 20). One may argue that the Kazakhs of the Astrakhan region, descendants of the “Bukey Kazakhs,” are not part of the Kazakh diaspora but a distinct ethnic group. Therefore, the efforts of the Kazakhstani authorities to weaken the Russian identity within this group and reinforce the Kazakh identity as a counterbalance are understandable.

Prior to the construction of the mausoleum in 2011, there existed a memorial and sacred site near the village of Maly Aral, dating back to the first half of the 19th century. At its heart was the tomb of the Muslim saint Seid Baba, serving as the dominant feature. Seid Baba (Sayyid bin Kulwai Sayyid Ghali, c. 1741–1812), known for his scholarship and healing ability, hailed from what is now the Astrakhan village of Khozhetaevka, formerly a Karagash-Nogai settlement. Following the disintegration of the Golden Horde, the lands between the Ural and Volga rivers first belonged to the Nogai Horde and, from the 1630s until 1771, to the Kalmyk Khanate. The Karagash Nogais, who lived in the area

¹³ The Golden Horde — The Golden Cradle: The Origins of Kazakh Statehood and Modernity // Kazinform International News Agency. September 4, 2019. (In Russian). URL: https://www.inform.kz/ru/zolotaya-orda-zolotaya-kolybel-istoki-kazahskoy-gosudarstvennosti-sovremennost_a3562397 (accessed: 16.08.2023).

throughout this period, actively engaged in the foundation of the Bukey Horde. One of Bukey Khan's close associates was the aforementioned Seid Baba, whom the Khan greatly esteemed for his erudition and medical prowess (Seid Baba bore the title of *murshid*, a Sufi mentor). The Khan instructed that he was to be buried not in the vicinity of his headquarters at Khan Ordasy but near the grave of Seid Baba, his mentor and personal physician. For two centuries, the tomb of the holy Seid Baba was held in veneration by numerous pilgrims coming to the place (Syzranov, 2008, p. 32), while the grave of Bukey Khan was located on the periphery of this sacred site.

The construction of the Bukey Khan mausoleum in 2011 resulted in a significant transformation of the site. The earlier dominant mausoleum, that of Seid Baba, is now overshadowed by the enormous 19-metre-tall mausoleum of the Khan. The character of the space has altered as well, now being secular, historical and political, rather than religious. Its ethnic affiliation did not remain the same either. Previously, the saint's tomb was surrounded by an ancient Karagash-Nogai cemetery (Ishmukhambetov, 2013), which, as reported by local residents, was barbarically destroyed during the construction.¹⁴ As a consequence, the historical sacred site of the Nogais was kazakhified. Mausoleum groundkeepers mentioned in an interview from May 2021 that the construction of the memorial caused Kazakh nationalist groups to show interest in the place. Subsequently, these groups started to disseminate rumours that the site was the resting place of not only Bukey Khan but also other prominent figures in Kazakh history.¹⁵

The 'Kazakhification' of the Seid Baba memorial, revered by the Karagash Nogais, is well in line with Kazakhstan's current historical politics concerning the Russian Nogais. This

¹⁴ Field data. An interview with I. Abuali in Astrakhan (May 30, 2021).

¹⁵ Field data. An interview with a groundskeeper of the Seid-Baba and Bukey-Khan memorial in Maly Aral (May 31, 2021).

ethnic group occupies a particular significance for Kazakhstan in the struggle for the Golden Horde's heritage. The symbolic appropriation of Nogai history and culture makes it possible to seal the chronological, spatial and cultural gap in the historical-ideological construct tracing the origins of the Kazakh khanate to the Golden Horde. The Nogai Horde, the polity that existed from the first half of the 15th century to the first half of the 17th century at the former heart of the Golden Horde in the interfluvium of the Ural and Volga rivers, had its own dynasty founded by the Golden Horde *beylerbey* Edigu. Therefore, it was the only direct descendant of the Golden Horde. The Nogais have left behind a substantial literary legacy of epic poetry, which has garnered extensive acclaim among the Kazakhs.

These endeavours ultimately resulted in the formation of the myth surrounding the Nogai (from Nogai) period, during which an ethnicity bearing the same name existed within the Golden Horde. This ethnic group is believed to have diverged later into the Nogais, the Kazakhs and the Karakalpaks.¹⁶ It can therefore be concluded that the Nogais and the Kazakhs are a single but divided people (Zargishiev, 2020). This myth is systematically disseminated within Kazakhstan's historical politics. For example, during the summer of 2018, N.A. Nazarbayev made a statement in Kazan in which he asserted that the Kazan queen Söyembikä was of Kazakh origin as a descendent of the *beylerbey* Edigu.¹⁷ Concurrently, news items started to appear in the Kazakhstani media, saying that the grave of Edigu is located in Kazakhstan.¹⁸ Collections

¹⁶ No historical source related to the Golden Horde and the post-Horde states records the existence of such a people. All constructs regarding the 'Nogai' people are derived from folklore, where this term is used to create an epic image of the people of the golden age.

¹⁷ Nursultan Nazarbayev Announced at Kazan Federal University That Queen Söyembikä Has Kazakh Roots // Business Online. June 15, 2018. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.business-gazeta.ru/news/385599> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

¹⁸ See: Gafiyatullina I. Edigu Peak and Ulytau: Amazing Sacred Places of Kazakhstan. Part 1 // Russia — The Islamic

of documents on Kazakhstan's history were published, featuring a wealth of materials concerning the Nogai Horde and other medieval Nogai polities.¹⁹

World Strategic Vision Group. March 27, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://russia-is1world.ru/in-world/sakralnye-mesta-kazahstana-cast-1/> (accessed: 16.08.2023); Gerber V. The Ruler of the Golden Horde Buried in the Aktoke Region? // Ekspress K. November 23, 2018. (In Russian). URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20220410031336/https://exk.kz/news/36623/vlastitel-zolotoi-ordy-pokhoronien-v-aktiubinskoi-oblasti> (accessed: 16.08.2023).

¹⁹ History of Kazakhstan in Russian Sources of the 16th — 20th Centuries (in 10 volumes): Vol. 1. Ambassadorial Materials of the Russian State (15th —

Conclusion

The analysis of Kazakhstan's symbolic act of erecting the Bukey Khan mausoleum in the Astrakhan region in 2011 facilitated the revelation of both the motives behind the country's extension of historical politics to a Russian territory and the specific symbolic goals pursued within this initiative. The motives and goals of this policy are a consequence of the trajectory that Kazakhstan's official historical discourse has taken over the past twenty years.

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About the authors:

Volkhonskiy Mikhail Alekseevich — PhD (History), Associate Professor, Department of International Relations and Russia’s Foreign Policy, MGIMO University; eLibrary SPIN-code: 7994-9232; ORCID: 0000-0001-6189-734X; e-mail: volhonskyma@yandex.ru

Yarlykapov Akhmet Aminovich — PhD (History), Leading Research Fellow, Institute of International Studies, MGIMO University; eLibrary SPIN-code: 9173-6586; ORCID: 0000-0001-5173-0909; e-mail itbal@mail.ru