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‘Subalterns’ in the Russian Imperial Service. The Case of Bronisław Zaleski and Iskander Batyrshyn

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Abstract

The text examines one of the most important aspects of Russian imperialism, namely its multiculturalism. The practice of exiling politically uncertain people to the east of the Empire, as well as opening the possibilities for some privileged *compradors* to pursue careers, were only a tiny fraction of the strategies used by the Russian authorities to involve representatives of various national minorities in (co)building the Empire. It allowed the Russian Empire to use those people’s physical and intellectual potential to expand the state’s borders, including during warfare. The encounter of the Polish exile Bronisław Zaleski and the translator of Tatar origins, Iskander Batyrshyn, during the military campaign against the Khoqand fortress Aq Masjid will serve as an example. By comparing their diaries, which both of them kept throughout the entire expedition, we can gain insights into the intricate nature of their positions within the imperial structure, their reasons for participating in the venture, the impact the hostilities had on the local population, and their perception of this conflict. These documents also reveal patterns of relationship-building between imperial subjects and authorities as well as the role of imperial power in stimulating, restricting or regulating relations between different nations.

Keywords: *Russian Empire; Khanate of Khoqand; (the conquest of) Central Asia; Polish exiles; Bronisław Zaleski; Iskander Batyrshyn*

The horses kept stopping in our camp, and the column spread so much that a few dozen men could break it up. Perovskii rode his horse two and three versts ahead, almost without a guard, even though we were on hostile territory. But we have such an enemy that we have not heard of the Kokands yet.

(Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927,ⁱ pp. 5-6)

These words were written on 18 June 1853 by Bronisław Zaleski – a Polish political exile – in his diary, which he kept during the military expedition to the fortress of Aq Masjid, called Ak-Mechet in the Russian Empire.ⁱⁱ How did it happen that a Polish nobleman found himself in the Russian army in Central Asia in the middle of the 19th century? Why did he voluntarily join the military mission against the Khanate of Khoqand, despite being oppressed for his pro-independence aspirations himself? What were the reasons that, even after being released from forced service and returning to his homeland, he kept silent about this particular episode of his service in Russian uniform on the Orenburg line in his texts published on Central Asia?

1. The Russian imperial project

To understand how a Polish nobleman found himself in the Russian army positioned on the border with Central Asia, we must delve into the historical backdrop of Russian imperial ambitions directed towards the East and the West, and whose territorial gains – unlike other Western colonial ventures – were directed at neighbouring territories (Hobsbawm, 1989, p. 95). One of the reasons the Russian authorities were interested in moving towards the centre of the Eurasian continent was the desire to access the long-distance transcontinental trade, which specialised in transporting luxury goods from India and China through Central Asia and on to the West (Ross 2020, p. 71; Levi, 1999, p. 519.) Furthermore, part of the Russian political elite saw the necessity of maintaining political and economic control over the borderlands, pursuing strategic, well-defined borders for the Empire.

The first contacts between the Kazakhsⁱⁱⁱ and representatives of Muscovy were recorded in the 1570s and 80s (Remnev & Sukhikh, 2006). Following a lengthy hiatus, contacts resumed at the beginning of the 18th century, when in 1731, the Khan of the Lesser Juz – Abul Khair – sought opportunities for political rapprochement with the Russian Empire. To discuss the terms of the ‘oath of allegiance’, the College of Foreign Affairs delegated General Kutlu-Muhammad (Aleksei) Tevkelev – a Tatar nobleman in the services of the Empire (Morrison, 2020 p.73). According to Tevkelev, Abul Khair’s primary reasons for this step were the proximity of the Russian borderlands, the hope of protection and mediation in conflicts with Bashkirs and Kalmyks, free access to Russian markets and pastures near Russian fortifications, and finally, and probably most importantly, his wish to strengthen his feeble position among the nomads, while the threat posed by Junghars, as exposed in Soviet historiography, was marginal. In return for patronage, the Kazakh Khan promised to be loyal to Empress Anna, support Russian military expeditions, pay the tax (*yasak*),^{iv} and monitor the caravans of merchants crossing territories that belonged to him (Vasil’ev, 2014).

Throughout the 18th century, representatives of various clans followed his example and swore an oath of allegiance to the Russian Empire, however, without being in a rush to fulfil the promised obligations. As a result, the Russian authorities extended their formal rule over most of the Lesser and Middle Juz, i.e., the northern, northwestern, northeastern, and central regions of today’s Kazakhstan. Despite the Russian claim to supremacy in the steppes, its power was then rather nominal. For a long time, this arrangement appeared to be beneficial for the nomads due to the instability of the khan’s power and conflicts among ambitious and powerful rival sultans who sought additional support for their positions (Morrison, 2020, p.74). Nevertheless, the different expectations and understandings of the ‘allegiance’ and the obligations of both sides caused many future conflicts and armed uprisings of nomads.

The progressive subjugation of the Central Asian steppes and their incorporation into the Empire ran concurrently with Russian expansion to the west and northwest. The consequences of this, among others, were the subsequent partitions of Poland. Poland’s final loss of independence in 1795 initiated the beginning of a new chapter in its history. Starting with the trial of a group of students who called themselves philomaths (in 1823-1824 in Vilnius) (Witkowska, 1998; Borowczyk, 2014), the threat of exile to the east of the Empire loomed over any conspiracy and nation-building activities. The major waves of Polish convicts exiled to the east took place after the fall of the November Uprising (1831-1832) and the January Uprising (1863-1864) (Adamczewski, 2019; Caban, 2001; Kaczyńska, 1991). Exile served as both a rigorous means of ensuring its citizens’ obedience and a way for the imperial

authorities to keep and secure control over vast areas of the continually-expanding state, utilising their physical abilities, lore, experience, and other talents. It made it possible to replenish the ranks of skilled military and administrative staff, a lack of which the Russian Empire suffered throughout the 19th century. Jan Witkiewicz may serve as an emblematic example of such a person. He undertook two diplomatic and intelligence expeditions for the Russian state: the first to Khiva in 1835-1836 and the second to Iran and Afghanistan in 1837-1839. The information obtained was used to organise the military march against the Khivan Khanate, which will be discussed briefly (Sapargalijew & Djakow, 1986; Jewsiewicki, 1983; Morrison, 2014). Under such specific circumstances, political prisoners could join the ranks of imperial agents without disrupting the overall structure of hierarchy subordination. It is necessary to emphasise here the ambivalent status of the Polish exiles involved in imperial politics. Namely, to be pardoned and return home, they had to comply with the state system's rules, which *de facto* oppressed them.

2. A Polish nobleman in Russian military uniform

Bronisław Zaleski (1820–1880) was born into a wealthy noble family in the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. He was arrested for the first time in 1838, during his studies in Dorpat,^v for his involvement with a revolutionist, democratic student union that opposed Russian rule. In October 1841, after spending two years in prison while undergoing investigation, Zaleski was sentenced to exile in Chernihiv. Pardoned in 1844, he returned to Vilnius and began taking private drawing lessons. In 1846, he was arrested again only because of his acquaintance with Jan Roehr and Apolin Hofmeister, who in turn were responsible for organising a conspiratorial network and preparing the ground for future fights for independence. In 1848, Zaleski was sentenced to penal conscription into the Russian army, with the loss of his noble title (Caban, 2006). He was sent to Orenburg – a city which was established in the 1730s along the Ural River. Its founders envisioned it as Russia's "window to the East" (Khodarkovsky, 2004, p. 156). The Orenburg Line Battalions were the largest of Russia's peripheral military units at the time.

The development of fortification lines along and into the Central Asian steppes allowed the Russian Empire to absorb both people and land, and permitted their inclusion into the Empire's administrative and legal system while moving the undefined frontier line further (Khodarkovsky, 2004; Ross, 2020). The indeterminate nature of the physical and ontological framework of the borderland (Bassin, 1991) influenced Russian colonial strategies, disclosing

the geography of the imperial power (Remnev, 2000). The Russian ‘contact zones’ (Pratt, 1992) served as a transitional space that facilitated and supervised relationships between residents on the opposite sides of the fortification line and enabled the exchange of knowledge, cultural patterns, material goods, and the migration of people. This gradually strengthened the bonds between the Empire’s different parts, making the steppes’ future military and administrative absorption inevitable. Newly-emerging bonds were marked by the power imbalance in hierarchy relations (Campbell, 2017, p. 77; Sultangalieva, 2012, p. 62).

Similar to the borderlands of Siberia and the Caucasus, the southern Urals gave rise to a new type of peripheral communities (Gerasimov et al., 2012). The proximity of nomadic peoples impacted the construction of the Russian periphery’s identity, which operated with *xenotopic* (Schick, 2012) and an artificial orientalist antinomic, binary structures that aimed to divide all its inhabitants into homogenised groups such as ‘us’ versus ‘them’ (Said, 1979; Loomba, 1998). Yet, in practice, both the frontier and the nomad communities were not structured “in accordance with a two-class or two-race stratification” (Osterhammel, 2014, p. 287). The reason for this was the ‘permanent temporality’ and the constant shifting of the imperial borders into the depths of the Asian continent (Barrett, 1999; Jersild, 2002; Khodarkovsky, 2004). As a result of this duality, it became impossible to establish clear territorial or ethnic dividing lines, or to determine the identities of imperial citizens, political prisoners, or nomads. The borderland became a fascinating example of a laboratory, on the one hand, for the Russian Empire’s identity, allowing for the crystallization of a concise superior image of self. On the other, it established a new ‘colonial’ self for ‘subaltern’ groups involved in the imperial project, like Polish exiles and a few ‘chosen’ Muslims, like Tatar and Kazakh elites (Sultangalieva, 2012; Campbell, 2017; Ross, 2020; Gaibulina, 2021), without whom its whole imperial venture would not have been possible.

Similarly to other Polish political exiles, in his diaries, correspondence and published articles, Zaleski painted portraits of the ‘oppressor’, the ‘exotic’ nomads, and the political prisoners seen through the complexities inherent in the borderline nature. Furthermore, the imperial dichotomies of *xenotopic* oppositions coincided with his – Polish – ideas of progress, modernisation, and broadly understood ‘civilisation’ (Janion, 2006, Beauvois, 2016). The three-dimensional distinctions such as ‘Russianness,’ ‘Polishness,’ and ‘Easternness,’ also influenced his perception of the military operations carried out in this area and in which he took part.

3. Zaleski's journals from his expeditions

After the carnage of the Bekovich-Cherkasskii expedition in 1717 – the first Russian attempt to conquer Khiva – the Russian authorities realised the need to develop a new colonial policy by conducting regular scientific research instead of relying on occasional diplomatic contacts, intelligence journeys on the steppes, and vague data obtained from merchants. The primary aim of the new types of expeditions organised by the Russian Empire was to gain knowledge regarding the history, culture, customs, and social structures of Central Asian states while also gathering valuable information about the internal conditions, tensions, alliances, and conflicts between them (Sapargalijew & Djakow, 1986; Jewsiewicki, 1983) that could be “potentially relevant to the conduct of war” (Campbell, 2017, p. 34.) Moreover, they intended to provide ‘reliable’ evidence about the natural resources (needed among others for industry development) and cartographic reconstruction of the distant territories. The wide-ranging scope of the studies required the involvement of an entire ‘army’ of specialists from various scientific fields, as well as draughtsmen, cartographers, translators, guides, and many others. These activities contributed to improving the imperial bureaucratic system and aligning its future strategies.

Due to Russia's active search for anchorage on the Syr Darya River, in the first half of the 19th century Orenburg became also one of the leading exploration bases in the region. To Zaleski's luck, General Vladimir A. Obruchev quickly noticed his artistic talents, which were necessary during field research conducted next to the Caspian and Aral seas. Zaleski happily accepted the offer of work as a draughtsman, which relieved him from his burdensome military service (Caban, 2006). During his first journey to the steppes in 1851, the expedition crossed the Mangyshlak peninsula and the Ust-Yurt plateau in search of anthracite coal. The second one, in 1852, was sent to the Aral Sea and the Mugodzhär Mountains and was, above all, an intelligence mission. For the first time, Zaleski could learn more about the nomads' lives from first-hand experience. His primary informant and a ‘guide to steppe culture’ was Kuzumbai, a local guide and former steppe thief whom he met during the second expedition and described as follows:

At the age of 12, he started to steal cattle, and for 15 years, he was one of the first steppe thieves. During the expedition to the Khivan Khanate, he became an ‘honest man’ and began to serve as a guide for the Russian troops in the steppes (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p. 13.)

The mutual attitudes of Zaleski and Kuzumbai reflected broader relationships formed among various ethnic groups and exemplified the dynamics of Russian ‘contact zones’. The Empire, as a transnational state structure, was a prerequisite for encounters between representatives of the conquered nations. It not only absorbed further ethnic groups into its

ranks but also assigned them new positions and functions outside the previous social structures. The relationships established in such conditions were permeated with the spirit of supremacy. Zaleski seemed unaware of the complexity of the political conditions and the implicit relationship of domination and subordination that affected his relations with Kuzumbai. The ambiguous position of the Kazakh guide was evidenced by the entry in Zaleski's diary of August 14, 1852:

In the afternoon, the issue with the Kirgizs. They stole some fish from a miner. So, we had to go after them. Kuzumbai begged to forgive them, on his knees, with a strange expression on his face. [...] he did not want to chase the fleeing Kirgizs. He was heavily scolded for this scene (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p. 28).

Apart from the opportunity to get to know the guide better, the second journey also allowed Zaleski to meet a charismatic and influential person among the Kazakhs living on the southern outskirts of the steppes – the *batyr*^{vi} and head of his clan Iset Kutebarov (Eset Kutebar Uly). Zaleski visited his *aul*^{vii} on 5 and 6 August 1852, on the way back from the Mugodzhari Mountains. The portrait of the *batyr* that Zaleski wrote down in his private diary showed him in a better light, with more warm words than the one he sent in a letter to his patroness and friend, Róża Sobańska^{viii}. He noted in his diary, that Iset was:

A *Batyr* famous throughout the steppes. A lovely character, a very noble and kind person. [...] He had dignity all over his appearance. He did not want to surrender to Russia for a long time. The imperial troops searched for him and could not catch up. In the end, he, together with all his clan joined other Kirgizs subordinated to the Empire. He did not want to accept any rank, preferring to stay a *batyr* [...] (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p. 26).

This encounter, and all others during this trip made a great impression on Zaleski, even though all his conversations were mediated through translators. For the first time, he got acquainted with the steppe dwellers and collected the ethnographic impressions he wished to share with Sobańska. The information about local leaders and their attitudes toward the Russian state had a different significance for the imperial authorities, who sought to assess the prevailing mood of the nomads, particularly those who had recently become imperial subjects or were claimed as such by Russia, and to determine whether they would cooperate or resist in the case of a conflict with one of the Central Asian khanates.

In parallel to Zaleski's expedition, Colonel Ivan F. Blaramberg led another military and intelligence mission in the steppes. His task, in turn, was to determine which bank of the Syr Darya river the Aq Masjid fortress was on and to capture it if possible. Despite failing to achieve the ultimate goal, this expedition provided more accurate information regarding the construction of the fortress ramparts, proving that heavy artillery was not the most effective weapon against it (Morrison, 2020, pp. 129-132). As a result, the topographical, political, and

strategic data obtained from both expeditions in collaboration with local people formed the basis for the next military steps in the region planned by the General and the Governor of the Orenburg Governorate Vasily Perovskii.

4. Towards the centre of the Asian continent

In the second half of the 19th century, having anchored itself on the territories of the Lesser and Middle Juz, the Russian Empire headed towards the great Asian khanates. The Russian side used a historical argument to claim the rights of Kazakhs to the cities of Tashkent, Turkestan, and Sayram, which they lost at the beginning of the 18th century, to justify the reconquest (Perovskii 1878, p. 317). This argument legitimised the occupation of new territories and military operations, portraying the Russian Empire as defenders of their subjects who suffered from the ‘aggressive policies’ of neighbouring khanates, particularly the Khoqand Khanate, which had occupied most of the land along the Syr Darya River in the early 19th century (Galkin, 1868). In addition, the obsession caused by Britain’s active policy in India and the lack of clearly defined borders in the steppes caused concern for Russian authorities and played not a small role in the Russian decision to deepen its influence in Central Asia (Bekmakhanov, 1992; Dubovitskiy, 2010). Moreover, by participating in the competition against the biggest colonial power at the time – the British Empire – the Russian Empire solidified its status. However, Alexander Morrison has criticised the shallow understanding of the term “The Great Game”, as it presented the conquest of the region solely from the perspective of European powers, overlooking the indigenous inhabitants’ role, and their interest and agency in that ‘game’. As he showed, the need to secure and organise the supply structure for newly-established fortresses on the banks of the Syr Darya river was more critical for Russian authorities (2020, p. 167).

The first attempt to conquer one of the Central Asian khanates was made by Perovskii during his first term as a Governor. After arriving in Orenburg, he relocated a part of the army and Cossack troops to the border with the Kazakh steppes in 1835-36. The troops took over the area between the Ural and Kuraly rivers to construct new fortifications. He believed that the internal lands belonged to the Bashkirs, who due to their ‘tamed’ character and longstanding peace resulting from close ties with the Empire and its supervision, did not require any longer such intense military protection (Chernov, 1907). In 1839, with the support of Nicholas I, Perovskii led the first, however unsuccessful, march against the Khivan Khanate. Stanislav F. Tsiolkovsky, a major-general of Polish origin, was responsible for preparing the expedition and believed that the winters in steppes south of the Emba River were much milder

than on the border with Orenburg. He thought it would be easier for the troops to reach their destination in winter, withstanding the cold rather than the summer heat and the unbearable, annoying dust. For this reason, the army was also supplied with poor-quality clothes, causing high soldier mortality due to frostbite and disease. These assumptions regarding the climatic conditions, together with little knowledge of the terrain and Perovskii's decisive neglect of the knowledge and recommendations of Kazakh camel drivers, became the main reasons for the expedition's failure. The military units could not get further beyond the Emba River, losing two-thirds of their men and most of the pack animals. This fiasco tarnished Perovskii's reputation, contributing to his dismissal from Orenburg in 1842 (Chernov, 1907; Ivanin, 1874; Morrison, 2020).

However, in 1851, Perovskii resumed his post as Governor of the Orenburg Governorate. He wished to restore his honour and did not abandon the notion of taking over new positions along the Syr Darya River, as it held great strategic importance for the Russian authorities. This time, the choice fell on the Khoqand fortress – Aq Masjid. Remembering both previous defeats in 1839-40 and 1852, Perovskii personally looked into all the details during the ongoing preparations for the march. The two reconnaissance expeditions from 1852 were crucial in making the upcoming military venture a success. They helped to determine the most convenient route leading to the fortress, designating places for stopovers, water points, areas with sufficient forage for animals, etc. (Chernov, 1907).

5. On hostile territory

In 1853, Zaleski sought permission to join the expedition to Aq Masjid, hoping to earn an officer's rank and return home. In a letter to Sobańska of 1 April 1853, he explained his motivation in the following way: "Maybe the baptism of fire will give us [political exiles] the right finally to see our mothers and families" (*Z Orenburga*, 1881, p. 241). This decision, as Wiesław Caban suggested, included a lot of calculations because Zaleski anticipated being most likely assigned to the officers' staff, where he would work mainly on various plans as a draftsman (Caban, 2006). Zaleski's wish was granted, and he joined one of the units, leaving Orenburg on 24 April 1853. His role involved preparing sketches, drawings, and maps. In his diary, he documented all available information regarding the route, vegetation, and landscape as well as facts, fragments of conversations held by soldiers, and even rumours they talked over, occasionally including critical commentary that he could not express publicly, such as the one below:

The horses kept stopping in our camp, and the column spread so much that a

few dozen men could break it up. Perovskii rode his horse two and three versts ahead, almost without a guard, even though we were on hostile territory. But we have such an enemy that we have not heard of the Kokands yet (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, pp. 5-6).

Despite these remarks, Zaleski, following the orientalist perspective, justified both his involvement in military operations on the Russian side and Russian territorial aspirations by reproducing the imperial discourse in which Russia acted as a defender of its subjects – the Kazakhs – and their interests. On 18 June 1853, Zaleski noted: “Since the Kokand built Ak Mechet, the Kirgizs, plundered by them, cultivate less land” (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p. 5). Moreover, Zaleski supported the ‘progressive’ policy proclaimed by the Russian Empire and to some extent approved of the ‘colonisation’ of the steppes, identifying agriculture with the civilisation process. On 30 June 1853, he made an entry in his diary:

It would be best to let the Ural people settle here as it used to be next to the Ural River... they would take over Syr Darya, Kokand and further places, [...] and if not, Cossack settlements would always be more beneficial than lonely fortresses. Fortresses are defensive points and have military and strategic strength. In contrast, settlements are living bodies that can spread constantly. Their war is not resistant but offensive, and their power is moral. With the incredible ability of the Russians at colonisation, the local colonies could expand widely over time and play a significant role (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p. 8).

In Zaleski’s eyes, the ideas of the ‘rational’ exploitation of natural resources approved of the political, economic, and cultural invasion of the Russian Empire, treating the subjugation of the peoples of Central Asia as a process of rescuing them from a sort of ‘state of barbarism’. The Russian colonial conquest also resonated with so-called the Polish *mission civilisatrice* (Kieniewicz, 1977; Tazbir, 1987; Janion, 2006; Beauvois, 2016) and served him as some justification for his and other political exiles’ entanglement with the imperial policy of extensive exploration and participation in military expeditions. The Enlightenment concept of progress became the leading narrative figure in Zaleski’s texts, obscuring the forced aspect of the conquest and the control of the steppes.

An example of how relationships shifted among nomads and their interactions with imperial authorities during warfare can be seen in the conflict between the above-mentioned *batyr* Iset and the Russian representatives. Being among high-ranking officers of Perovskii’s staff most of the time, Zaleski could access some sensitive information, which he recorded in his diary. On 15 August 1853, he noted:

Iset Kutebarov, whom I visited last year together with Antipov, gathered about 2000 Kirgizs and is baranting^{ix} in the steppes. He abducted 60 horses from the Urals fortress [Ural’skoe ukreplenie]. In May, it was noticed that he was hostile towards Russian authorities, did not provide any of the required camels, and welcomed messengers from Khiva (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p. 11).

Sultan Arslan Janturin, who unlike Iset joined the Russian troops in the march to Aq-Masjid, tried to ease the tensions between the two sides, as Zaleski mentioned on 23 August:

Araslan, the head of one of the clans, has come. The issue related to Iset. Araslan [failed to get camels from Iset, so] was banished. [...] According to the gathered information, Iset went to the desert called Bursuk. They [Perovskii and officers] fear he will reach Khiva (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p. 12).

This example illustrates that in warfare, even the slightest disobedience could tarnish Russian authority and even impede the achievement of its goals; therefore, it had to be punished severely.

During this expedition, Zaleski did not collect numerous portraits of nomads, but the ones he captured were not viewed positively. Overall, he held a low opinion of the Kazakh elite accompanying them. He claimed:

Among Perovskii's column, there is a group of Kirgiz – our so-called military allies. They are led by sultan Elikey^x, a sly and cunning scoundrel who pretends to be a great friend of Russia. [...] He was supposed to lead 100 Kirgizs with him, but half is still missing. [...] In general, it is a group of robbers who once supported Khiva and Kokand against Russia; now, they are joining our ranks. Asian venality (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p.5-7)

Such assessment of the 'nomads' temperament', characterised like other Eastern nations following the common stereotype of being fickle and perfidious, coincided with the orientalist opinion of Russian travellers and scientists whose texts Zaleski perused^{xi} in preparation for the scientific expeditions. It is difficult to determine whether it was an oriental or an imperial discourse that had more significant influence on Zaleski's views. Nonetheless, both accounts strengthened and legitimised the colonial actions toward the 'Asian nations' for the imperial authorities and Zaleski as well.

6. The view from the steppes

On 2 July 1853, a day after arriving at Aq Masjid, Zaleski wrote in his diary:

Between 4 and 5 a.m. Perovskii sat me down to draw [the fortress] while he with Raminewski, Dandev.[il'], Orlovskii, Johanson, Batyrshyn and two Cossacks went to the fortress to talk to the Commander. The Kirgiz guide rode in the front and shouted at the besieged. They let him within 25 fathoms and shouted: "Come closer, we can't hear anything", and when he rode up, they shot at him with two rifles, only wounding him. Others started shooting at Perovskii and his entourage (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p.8).

The 'Kirgiz guide' mentioned was in fact, a member of Perovskii's closest staff, a Tatar translator Iskander Alukovich (Aluk uly) Batyrshyn, who also kept a diary (Batyrshyn, 2012) during the expedition and prepared a report based on it (Batyrshyn, 2007). Batyrshyn

was born in 1819 or 1820 in a family of assimilated Muslim Tatar aristocracy who had been granted an imperial noble title a few generations prior. Batyrshyn attended the Orenburg Neplyuev Military Cadet Corps, which was intended to raise the children of local noble Muslim families as professional translators and diplomats who would join the ranks of imperial officers (Ross, 2020, p. 82). After completing his studies in 1837, he began working as a translator for the Orenburg Frontier Border Commission. He was involved in quelling the Kazakh uprising led by Isatay Taymanuly and Makhambet Otemisuly in 1837-1838. In 1841, at Perovskii's behest, he took the post of a teacher of Turkic languages in the Neplyuev Cadet Corps, where he had graduated from. He fulfilled this role while continuing to work as a translator in the imperial administration (Batyrshyn, 2007, pp. 279-280). In 1853, Perovskii personally included Batyrshyn in the upcoming military expedition due to his impeccable service and unwavering loyalty to the Russian authorities.

Batyrshyn personified a typical example of a descendant of the generation of *compradors*,^{xiii} who not only owed their position thanks to cooperating with the imperial power but also promoted its values and backed its expansion towards the south of the continent. The Russian model of the phenomenon of *compradors* originated from the policy initiated by Catherine II and her ambitions to 'civilise' and 'moralise' the recently incorporated 'eastern' nations and by their selective inclusion into the system of Russian table of ranks (Khodarkovsky, 2004; Remnev & Sukhikh, 2006). She approved the project elaborated by the governor of Orenburg – Dmitry Volkov – of opening schools for the children of local elites in borderland cities. The consequence of the introduced educational programme, among others, was the formation of the first Muslim intelligentsia in the Western sense of the term, and the preparation of a competent cadre of officials of indigenous origin, versed in steppe customs and 'European' in "taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect" (Anderson, 2006, p. 91).

Closely steered by the state, reformed schooling was one of the most effective imperial tools that served cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). The long-term separation of nomads' children in frontier towns caused a rupture in the transmission of cultural practices, patterns, and beliefs (Baliński & Rakoczy, 2015), altering their thoughts, images, values, ideas, and aspirations by proposing alternatives to traditional norms to follow. The hidden subversive force of European scientific institutions and concepts of enlightenment lay in their alleged 'disinterest' and, therefore, could be internalised and propagated by part of the 'subordinated' as a natural hierarchy order (Gandhi, 1998). Many representatives of local ethnic groups enrolled in imperial schools found themselves in an irreconcilable position. Despite their origins, they advocated reforms and the need to spread certain Western values and norms,

assisting the progressive integration of the steppes with the rest of the Empire and becoming imperial agents. They also supported it during ‘peaceful’ scientific expeditions and military operations. Tatars (and later Kazakhs) involved in the Russian imperial power structure, blurred the simple division between coloniser and colonised by filling out the liminal intermediate position. Local “interpreters, messengers, mediators, cultural specialists, and businessmen’ by serving ‘in the vanguard of Russia’s colonial expansion” (Ross, 2020, p. 2) proved to be one of the driving forces. However, they were not perceived as equal within the imperial structure they had adopted, and remained utterly dependent on it. The most striking examples of Kazakhs in Russian service were Ybyrai Altynsarin, who adopted the Cyrillic script for the orthography of the Kazakh language (Campbell, 2017, pp. 66-68), and Shokan Valikhanov (Valikhanov, 1904, pp. xl-xli), an intelligence officer and ethnographer.

From his part, Batyrshyn adopted not only Western patterns of conduct and assessment of the actions of the Russian authorities, but also the imperial and orientalist visions of Kazakhs and their obligations towards the Empire. He became, in a way, an agent recruiting new members of the imperial administration who could aid it in strengthening its stance in the region. Sultan Ilekey, whom Zaleski criticised so thoroughly in doubting his remorse for past wrongdoings and sincerity of his intentions for the Russian Empire, can serve as an example of a newly-admitted subject. In his report, Batyrshyn revealed the full complexity and difficulty of the situation faced by the sultan. In 1840, after being elected as a khan by part of the clans of the Lesser Juz, he refused to acknowledge Russian suzerainty. Having received confirmation of his title of khan from the Khan of Khiva, he fled south towards the Syr Darya, aiming to stay away from the Russian frontier. However, due to a false accusation in 1850, his protector imprisoned him and his family. In 1852, Ilekey managed to escape. With no other options, he arrived in Orenburg, surrendering to his former enemy, the Russian Empire, who graciously welcomed him back, promising to help liberate his family in exchange for his faithful service (Batyrshyn, 2007, pp. 302-304).

In his diary, Zaleski confirmed Ilekey’s story, highlighting, however, his previous crimes against the Russian authorities:

Ilekey used to rob Kirgizs under Russian rule and even regularly attack government transports. The Khan of Khiva proclaimed him a Khan of the Kirgizs, and they lived in peace for a long time. However, Ilekey was recently suspected of having relations with Bukhara. It put him in danger of death. So, he escaped to Russia, where he begged Perovskii for forgiveness (Bcz, rkps, sygn. 6927, p.7).

The main difference between the two versions was about whom Ilekey turned to when he supposedly betrayed his protector. Zaleski was convinced that the rebellious Khan

was seeking support in Bukhara, while according to Batyrshyn, the Khan of Khiva accused Ilekey of siding with Russia.

Batyrshyn saw the primary reason for the obstinate and rebellious character of the sultan as being part of tradition. He claimed that Ilekey:

Without adequate mentors to guide him on his duties towards Russia, he assumed the title of khan bestowed upon him by his people. He also took on the responsibility of protecting his subjects, who wished to have a khan due to their custom and the lack of nearby Russian cities for refuge from Khiva and Kokand incursions (Batyrshyn, 2007, p. 301).

As Sultangalieva noted, besides being simple translators, Tatars also played the role of “arbiters in relations between the Kazakh population and the regional authorities, and helped in the ‘explanation of the illegal acts’ of insurgent Kazakhs” (2012, p. 62). Living up to his duties and taking advantage of the longer time spent with the former Khan, Batyrshyn tried to explain his obligations towards the Russian government and:

cautiously introduce [Ilekey] to Russian customs [...]. [Batyrshyn also] assured [Ilekey] that the Russian authorities strive to maintain friendly relations with all neighbouring states, promote peace and understanding, assist them when needed, and defend its allies against enemies (Batyrshyn, 2007, p. 311).

Batyrshyn’s unquestionable belief in Russia’s righteous intentions towards the Central Asian khanates is noteworthy. According to him, the Russian Empire never had any will to conduct warfare against any of them and would have done so as a last resort when other means, including diplomatic or persuasion, did not help. Therefore, he argued that every military action was made regretfully, as Russia “never wanted unnecessary bloodshed” (Batyrshyn, 2007). While according to Central Asian sources, like *Ta’rikh-i’ Aliquli*, the Russian side consistently ignored the Khoqands’ diplomatic attempts to regulate relations on the border peacefully, proving that the Empire chose the path of further conquest (Morrison, 2020, p. 164).

The most significant differences between the two documents, prepared by a Polish exile and a Tatar translator, were not so much about facts because both diarists invoked relatively similar information, but at the level of assessing the attitude and commitment of the nomads. Unlike Zaleski, Batyrshyn generally considered nomads to be hard-working while characterising Ilekey as a proud, energetic, intelligent person with a strong desire for power. However, he added that the sultan’s pride had diminished after spending three months in close contact with Russian government representatives. Presumably, their origin, common language, and understanding of steppe customs eased communication between the Tatar translator and the Kazakh sultan. Batyrshyn believed that imperial officials distrusted Ilekey because of his

previous ‘crimes’. Respected in the steppe, having significant influence among some clans occupying the southern steppes bordering the Khoqand Khanate, and having extensive knowledge of the region, the former Khan, according to the Tatar translator, provided invaluable assistance before and during the capture of the Aq Masjid fortress. He also claimed that Ilekey had managed to gather up to 150 people (not half the number he had promised, as Zaleski noted). The nomads primarily assisted with tasks such as accompanying officers, guarding the road to Aq Masjid (in case reinforcements were sent from Tashkent or Turkestan), and constructing barracks and other necessary structures during the siege. However, they did not participate in the siege itself or any military actions, nor in the assault (Batyrtshyn, 2012, pp. 330-332, p. 345, pp. 353-354). From Batyrshyn’s text, we can notice that Ilekey, on his part, also wanted revenge on his slanderer. For this purpose, he not only tried to push the idea of conquering the Khivan Khanate by giving precise data on the size of its army, its organisation, and system of supplies, but also presented a detailed plan of the march, starting with indications of the best season, route, and water sources, etc., so that such a venture could end favourably for the Russian side (Batyrtshyn, 2007).

Dependent on imperial power, the new generation of the steppe elite, both those educated in Russian borderland cities and those who had been forced to seek support from a more powerful ally in the region, turned out to be valuable intermediaries between two distinct worlds: the East and the West, making them ideal support for the functioning of the borderland authorities (Bekmakhanov, 1992; Valikhanov, 1904; Remnev, 2000; Vasil’ev, 2014). By opening career opportunities for opportunistic steppe inhabitants, Russian colonial rule formed a privileged social class that acted in the name and for the benefit of the Empire, and was interested in strengthening ties with it. Their knowledge about the steppes’ topography, hydrology, flora, and fauna, as well as about the local traditions, internal entanglements, and rivalry between different khanates, allowed the imperial representatives to plan and successfully organise the further annexation of Central Asia.

7. The enemy of my enemy

The example of Iset Kutebarov, equally mentioned by Zaleski, showed a different side of the relationship between the steppe elite and the imperial power. It reveals the impossibility of remaining entirely obedient to Russian administration and, at the same time, protecting the interests of one’s clan. At the very beginning of the expedition against Khoqand in May 1853, as Zaleski suggested, Kazakh *batyr* moved southward, away from the Russian troops. The

reason for this was reluctance to provide camels to transport artillery and food for the Russian army (Batyrshyn, 2012). In light of the growing conflict, sultan Arslan attempted to mediate several times; on the one hand, explaining the reasons for refusing to rent camels and, on the other hand, trying to persuade the Iset to obey the order. Arslan tried to assure Perovskii that Iset was at peace with the Russian authorities and his hesitation in giving the camels was caused by his “ignorance of knowledge of Russian customs” (Batyrshyn, 2012, p. 320). Arslan took on the responsibility of persuading his fellow clan leader, Iset, to do so, believing that once he overcame his “fears and misconceptions, he will become a faithful servant who is not afraid to come to the line”, meaning to Orenburg (Batyrshyn, 2012, p. 305). The issue of renting camels for the Empire’s needs during every expedition, including military ones, was a severe problem since the beginning of the penetration of Central Asia. Morrison recalled that cooperation with the nomads in this respect was crucial and often difficult (2020, pp. 42-49). Camels were the most valuable animals to nomads and, therefore occupied the highest level in the cattle hierarchy and were used as a form of payment. So, the death of one of them was intensely felt by all members of its owner’s family as a potential risk to their lives. For the Empire, however, camels were primarily a form of resource, a driving force, and their death mainly meant a loss to the budget on paper.

The triangle of dependence and subordination between Perovskii, Arslan, and Iset also uncovered a clash between two conflicting social structures. On the one hand, there was the centralised, vertical, rigid hierarchy of the Russian administration and army, and on the other, a more flexible, decentralised, and, to some extent, more ‘egalitarian’ nomad community based on electoral ‘democracy’, conditioned by the nomadic way of life. Perovskii’s reaction made it clear that they were incompatible with each other:

The General [Perovskii] talked about Iset Kutebarov, pointing out his resistance to provide the requested camels and that he maintained relations with the Khivins despite being afraid of them. The General blamed Arslan for interceding for Iset. In his opinion, Iset should be more fearful of the Russians than the Khivins (Batyrshyn, 2012, p.320).

In the end, Arslan was unable to obtain the camels from Iset, who was ready to pay the necessary penalty to end the case there (Batyrshyn, 2012, pp. 353-358). Such an agreement between sultan Arsalan and *batyr* Iset would only be justified if this conflict had been resolved through customary law, as both occupied equal status as heads of their clans (Yushkov, 1948). Therefore, neither could force the other to obey the order. However, it went against the Russian hierarchy of subordination and the authorities’ assumption that behests should be followed precisely, not ‘negotiated’.

The diplomatic fiasco that befell Arslan provoked an outburst of Perovskii's dissatisfaction. Arslan was accused of Iset's disobedience. In the opinion of the Russian general, this whole event also confirmed Arslan's weakness and lack of zeal to perform the duties assigned to him. Perovskii sent the Russian officer Mikhailov with a bigger military unit to collect camels from Iset, arrest him and his closest companions, and escort them all to Orenburg. (Batyrsyn, 2012, pp. 357-359). The rebellious *batyr*, however, managed to flee, and in 1855, attacked the aul of Arslan, killing him. Following extensive looting by Russian punitive forces against Iset's clan and allies, in 1858 he finally had to surrender and accept the oath of allegiance to the Russian Empire. In 1873, he participated in a march against the Khivan Khanate, just like Ilekey had done two decades prior.

Assessing the general mood among Kazakhs living in the south near the border with Khoqand, Batyrsyn concluded that they have taken an observing position and

depending on the circumstances, they will surrender to one or another side. If the Russians successfully capture the fortress, nomads will come under our authority. If not, they will remain under the Kokand rule (Batyrsyn, 2012, p. 338).

Batyrsyn believed that many nomads would be happy to become Russian subjects, as they felt oppressed because the Khoqand, Bukhara, and Khiva rulers did not recognise them as equals and discriminated against them more than their citizens. However, those with family or political connections in Khoqand might not wish to see a change in the balance of power in the region. Nevertheless, they were in the minority. An attack on a despised neighbour by a potential ally that at least declared its goodwill towards its steppe-dwellers gave grounds for them to take a neutral, if not favourable, attitude. Such an observation at least explained the lack of opposition among many Kazakhs to the military actions conducted against the Khoqand Khanate by the Russian Empire. Yet, until the very moment when one of the defensive ramparts of the fortress was blown up, the nomads (including Ilekey) had doubts about the Russian army's ability to take it (Batyrsyn, 2012, pp. 345-346), probably because of Blaramberg's failure from the year before.

The Tatar translator in Russian service presented the Khoqands as brave men who courageously defended their fortress, and most of them died for it, as for them it was a vital strategic and economic point as well. In his letter dated 28 July 1853, Perovskii, in turn, described the capture of Aq Masjid by stating that the Khoqands refused to surrender even after the wall was blown up and the Russian army stormed the fortress (Perovskii, 1878, p. 323).

Thanks to the support obtained from imperial rule, a few local intermediaries could strengthen their political status on the steppes and improve their economic position. In return,

the *compradors* were supposed to maintain the new order and suppress any dissatisfaction or emerging rebellious moods among other nomads. Their unique position was confirmed in the symbolic sphere by possessing expensive gifts (Mauss, 1990) received for their faithful service. In exchange, the Russian government also reinforced its influence in the region by transferring the responsibilities of controlling and enforcing obedience to the locals themselves. Was there any possibility of defending the interests of those nomads, who, on the one hand, did not want to accept the new hierarchy of duties and responsibilities according to a vertical, tight system of subordination, but were also not hostile to the Russian authorities as such? Based on the analysed examples, it appears there was no other option but to accept the new imperial order.

8. After the defeat

To After the spectacular surrender of the Aq Masjid, which took place on 28 July 1853, it was renamed Fort Perovsk in honour of its conqueror (Perovskii, 1879, p. 455). The capture of the first point on the Syr Darya River was a direct continuation of the Russian Empire's earlier



It is highly probable that this sketch was made by Zaleski, who was a draftsman attached to the expedition. In his diary, he mentioned numerous times that Perovskii instructed him to sketch fortresses from various angles. Furthermore, a comparison of the writing style in his diaries, which are preserved in the archives of the Czartoryski Library in Kraków, indicates significant similarities, confirming this hypothesis. <https://www.loc.gov/resource/ppmsca.09957/?sp=12>

conquests, and at the same time, it was only a prelude to further expansion and subordination of subsequent cities in the region (Valikhanov, 1984; Morrison, 2020).

Upon returning from the steppes, Zaleski wrote a letter to Sobańska summarising the expedition against the Khoqand Khanate:

What consequences it will have for us [Polish political prisoners], we will probably see soon. Each of us was glad to be there because the mere acquaintance with the danger is an acquisition in life (*Z Orenburga*, 1881, p. 244-245).

His hopes were partially fulfilled at the end of 1853, when General Perovskii personally promoted all Polish exiles who had participated in this venture. Zaleski received the rank of ensign. However, he had to wait until Alexander II ascended the throne, in 1856, to be released from the army and be able to return home (Kuczyński, 2015). Zaleski never published his diary nor utilised the materials contained in it in any manner. The reasons for this were most likely his morally questionable motives for joining the military mission towards an independent state. Zaleski's silence may be explained by remembering the ambiguous position of all political prisoners involved in Russian imperial service. Similar reasons (according to one of the versions) also may have moved Witkiewicz to commit suicide in 1839. Zaleski mentioned this difficult topic only once, in 1866 after his emigration to Paris, in his article entitled *Polish Exiles in Orenburg* where he sketched an idealised unified portrayal of Polish political prisoners in the Russian army:

When the expedition to Ak-Mechet, Kokandi fortress, came, [...] many of our compatriots took part in it by the General's will. [...] As for inhabitants of Central Asia, the besieged defended themselves well, but after blowing up the wall, the fortress was captured in August 1853. [...] For many, this expedition was the beginning of liberation from the soldier's uniform (*Z Orenburga*, 1881, p. 105-106).

In turn, Batyrshyn, after coming back from the expedition, received the medal of Saint Anna and an award of 600 roubles in silver. He resumed his previous teaching position, where he stayed until 1865. His further fate, as well as the date and place of his death, remain unknown (Batyrshyn, 2012, p. 285).

For Zaleski, as for many other Polish exiles, apart from the possibility of gaining an officer rank that would give hope for a pardon and the ability to come back to their homes, it was primarily a civilisational war which was waged in the name of 'universal values' and for the good of the nomads. This approach affected Zaleski's perception of all inhabitants of the East, explaining the 'homogenizing' divisions between 'us' and 'them', according to which a translator of Tatar origin became a 'Kirgiz'.

Interestingly, Batyrshyn presented a similar view but from a slightly different angle.

His documents portrayed different attitudes of nomads who assisted, observed, or openly refused to support hostile actions toward their neighbours. Thanks to his knowledge of the language and personal contacts with the inhabitants of the steppes, he avoided making a simplistic, black-and-white assessment of their role in warfare. However, according to him, the loyalty of some nomads who had joined the Russian Empire forcibly or willingly was not entirely trustworthy. Such an example was shown by Iset, who did not provide camels needed for the Kazakhs themselves, thus incurring the ire of the Russian authorities. Even sultan Ilekey, despite supporting the Russian authorities during the whole military expedition, was also, as Batyrshyn sensed, not entirely obedient. The Tatar translator noted in the margins that Ilekey would have taken the side of Kazakhs if ever there were any dispute between them and the Russians (Batyrshyn, 2012, p. 354). Batyrshyn, however, ultimately identified with the Russian Empire and repeatedly used such forms as ‘we’, ‘us’, and ‘our’ while referring to it.

Both Zaleski and Batyrshyn justified their involvement in the conquest of the Khoqand Khanate by claiming its necessity for progress and by sharing the Empire’s stance, which presented itself as the protector of the Kazakhs. It also implied that Zaleski and Batyrshyn naturalised and projected the elusive, and therefore inevitable, discriminatory and determinative language of Enlightenment (Nandy, 1983; Wiczorkiewicz, 2013). Western scientific language has created a common ideological ground that helped to capture the plurality of particular experiences of individuals in transcendent, objective analytical categories. Although Zaleski and Batyrshyn embraced the Enlightenment’s notion of progress and the mission to introduce civilisation and peace to the eastern nations, even through the conquest and their subjugation, it was impossible to create any sense of community between the two.

The examples given in this article confirm the thesis of Willard Sunderland (2003) on the multiculturalism of the Russian imperial-colonial project, emphasising that not only ethnic Russians participated in it. Each of the examples cited presented different types of ‘subalterns’ involved in the imperial frames and depicted new social divisions, hierarchies, dependencies, and obligations enforced from above by the authorities. The imperial condition was filled in by the asymmetry of power relations and determined by the spaces of encounter between its different subjects, blurring clear divisions between the ‘coloniser’ *versus* ‘colonised’, which threatened the colonial ideological structure *per se* (Stoler, 2009).

From the Russian Empire’s point of view, warfare sharpened the divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’, which at that point meant primarily ‘loyal’ or ‘disloyal’. Attempting to maintain a neutral position by using, for instance, the right of nomadic ‘equality’ (between

people of the same social status, as it happened to Iset and Arslan) conflicted with the hierarchical organisation of the Empire based on the ‘table of ranks’. From this perspective, a ‘neutral’ position meant a potential threat to the imperial power itself. Given such a complex relationship, any idea of a ‘common fate’ between Polish exiles and nomads, Tatar *compradors*, and nomads, and even within the nomad community itself, turned out to be insufficient upon closer examination. A closer look at the various ethnic groups taking part in the Russian colonial project and comparing both their mutual relations and their relations with the Russian authorities reveals how, through the principle of *divide et impera*, they engaged, supported, and stimulated various ‘civilising’ projects within the imperial one to the benefit of the Empire. This rule also helped to prevent the unification of different ethnic groups against the Russian state. Both Polish exiles and Tatar mediators in Russian service embraced concepts of ‘civilisational progress’ that were often aligned with the Empire’s intentions and were directed against other groups within the Empire – in this case, the Kazakhs. These examples demonstrate that various forms of subordination created distinct communities of interest, while the Empire was the only means of connecting them all.

Notes

ⁱThe Princes Czartoryski Library, manuscripts (all translations from Polish and Russian by K.G.).

ⁱⁱThe Aq Masjid fortress was established in 1820 by the Khanate of Khoqand on the banks of the Syr Darya River. Currently, it is known as Kyzylorda and is located in the southern part of Kazakhstan.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the 19th century, Kazakhs were commonly referred to as ‘Kirgiz’ by Russian authors and Polish exiles. Here and after, when citing sources, I have kept the name ‘Kirgiz’ but used ‘Kazakhs’ in the rest of the text.

By the middle of the 16th century, Kazakhs were divided into three Hordes, also called Juz: the Lesser Juz, the Middle Juz and the Great Juz. (Klyashtorny & Sultanov, 1992).

^{iv} The term ‘yasak’ originated from Mongolian-Turkish languages and originally referred to one of the many taxes collected by the Golden Horde. After its adoption by the Russian authorities, it was used to describe a general tax or tribute collected primarily from representatives of non-Christian nations. (Khodarkovsky, 2004, p. 61).

^v Today’s Tartu (the second biggest city in Estonia).

^{vi} In Kazakh, the term ‘batyr’ meant a courageous warrior and a leader of military units. They were held in high esteem in the steppe and were frequently selected as the heads of their clans. They enjoyed similar status as the steppe aristocracy and often acted as judges during trials according to the customary law of nomads.

^{vii} Among the Kazakhs and other Central Asian nomads, the term *aul* referred to a mobile nomadic camp consisting of yurts, typically composed of members of the same family or clan.

^{viii} Róża Sobańska (1798—1880) was a funder and member of the ‘Protective Committee’, which provided financial and material assistance to Poles exiled to the Russian Empire (Śliwowska, 1987).

^{ix} ‘Baranta’ (or ‘barymta’), was a practice in Kazakh customary law which involved the abduction of cattle belonging to someone suspected of a crime. It also guaranteed compensation in case the perpetrator tried to avoid appearing before a traditional nomad court. The Russian imperial administration referred to any cattle abduction in the steppes as ‘baranta’, often confusing it with simple theft. Therefore, here, ‘baranting’ means ‘plundering’.

^x Ermuhamed or Irmuhamed, Ilekey, Kasim Uly (1819-1883).

^{xi} He became acquainted, for instance, with the texts by Alexander von Humboldt or Alexey Levshin and others.

^{xii} This term originates from the Portuguese word ‘comprador’ and initially meant ‘purchaser’. In postcolonial theory, it refers to a group of local elites who gained their privileged position by collaborating with the colonisers. (Ashcroft et al., 2007; Gawrycki & Szeptycki, 2011)

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