

**[PRESENTATION ABSTRACT]**

**Exploring the Frontiers of Tradition and Translation:**

**Early Findings from the Textual Analysis of Pugachev-Era Kazak Documents**

In 1773 and 1774, the apparent hegemony of Imperial Russia over the Eurasian steppe was shattered by the rebellion of Emilian Pugachev. Although the revolt was ultimately crushed (and Pugachev executed), it raged for nearly two years across broad swaths of Russia, from Siberia, to the Urals and the Volga. At this time, the Kazak lands and people, located just across the frontier from the conflict, remained semi-independent—subject to Russian political and economic influence, but not yet under direct rule. Historians of the Kazaks have, therefore, tended to use Kazak responses to the uprising as a measure of their political and cultural attitudes toward the Russian Empire, at an intermediate stage in its expansion. My presentation, however, will seek to revisit the subject by means of new questions and methodologies. It is envisioned as the first step in a larger project, examining how ideas and belief systems may have been shared in the borderlands between the Kazak hordes and the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To that end, I will provide a close textual reading of an important Kazak document written in late 1773—a letter from Nurali Khan, leader of the Kazak Little Horde, to the rebel Pugachev—and contextualize it by reference to the earlier diplomatic correspondence of Nurali’s father, Abulkhair Khan.

The presentation will explore two major observations that emerge from this analysis. First, it will suggest that at the time of the rebellion, the framing of political discourse on the Kazak steppe was changing, compared to that of previous decades. In particular, Nurali’s correspondence, while similar in content to earlier documents, was quite different in its underlying political expectations and assumptions. For whereas prior diplomatic messages had

emphasized political *relationships*—that is, the bonds of commitment and patronage between superior and subject—Nurali’s text demonstrated a new sense of political *transactionality*, which presumed a closer accounting of reciprocal benefits and immediate personal interest. And second, the presentation will also highlight the challenges of translation at linguistic and cultural boundaries. For in the aftermath of the rebellion, Russian translations of Nurali’s letter introduced into it a focus on the legitimacy and royal credibility of Pugachev which had not existed in the original. This mistranslation reflected the preoccupation of government officials with questions of loyalty and treachery—and thereby serves to highlight the ways that misinterpretation could alter and distort the exchange of ideas on the steppe frontier.

Based on these early findings, the presentation will suggest that Kazak political ideas were in flux during the 1700s, in ways that reflected participation in wider networks of Eurasian intellectual exchange, albeit in highly mediated or attenuated forms. Likewise, it will confirm that the records left by Russian observers often encoded their own preoccupations, as much as the realities of the Kazaks they observed. Together, these observations provide evidence against long-standing notions that eighteenth-century Kazak politics was merely static or degenerative, reflecting only the ‘traditional’ practices of nomadic aristocracy and the ‘political disintegration’ attending Russian expansionism. Instead, we may begin to argue that alongside these realities, some Kazaks were also participating, in a limited way, in something like the early stirrings of modernity—characterized by openness to exploring new ideas about the political roles of state and individual—well before direct Russian rule was established. If borne out by further research, this idea could have far-reaching consequences for our understanding of the subsequent trajectory of Kazakhstan as a Russian imperial possession, a Soviet republic, and an independent nation.