

*Weapon of the Discontented?
Trans-River Migration as Tax
Avoidance Practice and Lever in
Eastern Bukhara*

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But such images of disjuncture and marginality are problematic as they obscure the ways in which the Frontier was, and is, not only a space of uncontrolled freedom, but also one that binds, connects and thus helps to forge powerful forms of solidarity, community, and collective identity that endure across time and space (Marsden et al. 2011, 4).

Until the early twentieth century, the border formed between contemporary Tajikistan and Afghanistan by the Panj River and the Amu River has been porous at best. Rulers repeatedly tried to extend their dominion to the other side and often managed to establish, at least temporarily, cross-river territories. Migration from one bank to the other was frequent, and family units in riparian areas would more often than not have members on both sides of the river. Migration, especially collective outmigration, however, was in many cases also an act of protest by disgruntled peasants or pastoralists who sought to evade disproportionate or irregular taxes, but the dearth of primary sources from this milieu has hampered historical research on the dynamics involved. Evasive migration as a frequent, if not every day, mode of protest was comparatively well documented. Outmigration and the trans-river migration to and from Afghanistan affected the interests of national and local authorities more intensely than other forms of protest because of its impact on security policies and the economy. Taxes from (cash) crops declined due to labour deficits, degradation of lands, and disuse of irrigation structures, and unprotected, depopulated border zones invited trouble from neighbours. In many cases, this migration forced authorities to negotiate terms that encouraged migrants to return. The available documentation—petitions to the Bukharan court, travelogues, newspapers, and Russian border post reports—covers the official attitude towards migratory practices, but is silent about the perspective of the affected populations. They are equally silent about other evasive practices or acts of resilience that peasants and pastoralists might have resorted to prior

to or after their flight. In the absence of sources coming directly from this milieu, we can only carefully attempt to reconstruct the agency, aspirations, and negotiation strategies employed by peasants and pastoralists in the border region from the scattered sources we have concerning their daily life and living conditions in these remote regions.

The study of trans-river migratory practices between Afghanistan and Tajikistan provides us with fresh perspectives in two ways. Firstly, it shines a spotlight on the peasant history of the southern and easternmost dominions of the Emirate of Bukhara (dissolved in 1924). This history is least researched even though these peasants were largely responsible for providing the Emirate with grain and rice. The particular features of their multiple trans-border connections have been downplayed to integrate them into modern, national history writing. Secondly, it prompts us to overcome certain limitations that come with the delineation of academic fields. Following the division of the Panj-Amu River basin into imperial British and Russian zones of influence during the so-called Great Game at the end of the nineteenth century, Tajikistan (together with the other former Soviet Central Asian republics) and Afghanistan are usually studied in different university departments. As a consequence, the trans-regional cultural, social, and political ties between Central Asia, Afghanistan, and South Asia attract little attention. By re-shifting the focus to a marginal population, we get a deeper understanding of local conceptualisations of this cross-river area, of its importance to them, and of its potential for rural agency beyond the modern perceptions of nation and border.

It was James Scott who, in 1985, first directed attention towards the less-than-spectacular, non-confrontational, evasive resistance practices of poorer parts of the rural population, and in doing so coined the expression *Weapons of the Weak*, which also inspired the title of this article (Scott 1990). Michael Adas (1986) went on to formally distinguish several modes of peasant resistance, while at the same time pointing to the multifarious links between every day, quasi-institutionalised forms of resistance and specific events such as rural riots or rebellions. After a boom of research on peasant resistance and evasive protest practices in the 1970s and 1980s, academics have recently begun to revisit the issue (see Adas 1986; Scott 1976, 1986, 1990, 2009; Mann 2012). However, relevant studies focusing on Central Asia and trans-border interactions remain rare.

Generally speaking, studies on Central Asian everyday forms of protest have been scarce in spite of Soviet appreciation of popular forms of resistance against the *exploiting classes*; only the more spectacular uprisings received

wider attention. Reluctance to focus on these matters may be grounded in the anti-colonial bias that some (albeit not all) of these rebellions had when, after the consolidation of the Soviet Union, the former coloniser turned into the *brother nation*. Additionally, many uprisings were chiliastic in nature, with leaders who were regarded as saint-like figures or by preeminent personages of well-established religious, political, or economic provenance; they thus failed to qualify in terms of class-conscious struggle. The surviving primary sources covering these events have normally been written by people from the upper echelons, although they were not always unsympathetic to the peasants' cause.¹ Soviet scholars noted with incredulity that political and religious authority figures who were identified in the sources by their titles were among the participants of peasant uprisings in Eastern Bukhara (Mukhtarov 1988a, 29–30; Semënov 1988, 33–34). Multiple ties of personal allegiance, (coercive) reciprocity, and kinship worked towards local social cohesion. Adas (1986, 66) has maintained that any “[s]erious study of avoidance protest requires that we examine more fully the important links that have existed between ongoing or quasi-institutionalised modes of peasant resistance and specific outbursts of rural riot or rebellion, as well as the connections between peasant movements at different points in time.” In fact, local authorities in Bukhara often found themselves caught between the demands of central government executive bodies and local grievances (see Mukhsinova 1959).

In this paper, I argue that the trans-river character of the evasive migration in the Panj-Amu River border region added yet a further dimension to the avoidance practice. In comparison with tax evasive migration in the interior parts of the Emirate, loss of population in the riparian zones caused heightened anxiety among the central government and local officials of Bukhara. Both the Afghan and Bukharan governments were eager to keep their riparian zones populated. To pursue this goal, they constantly vied with each other to attract people from the other side of the river. This opened up spaces of resistance for the border population by allowing them to use migration not only as evasive practice, but also for leverage in negotiating better tax and living conditions. These trans-river migrations apparently resulted in unique infrastructures tailored to the migrants' needs, with networks and service providers assisting with stream crossing, housing, and logistics. In taking up Adas's (1986) notion of evasive practices as part of the social fabric, I examine how the trans-regionality of the Panj and Amu River regions provided its rural populations with possibilities that could turn their marginality into an advantage.

1 These are mainly petitions and similar documentation of communication between different levels of authority among Bukharan officials.

Eastern Bukhara: Historical and geographical background

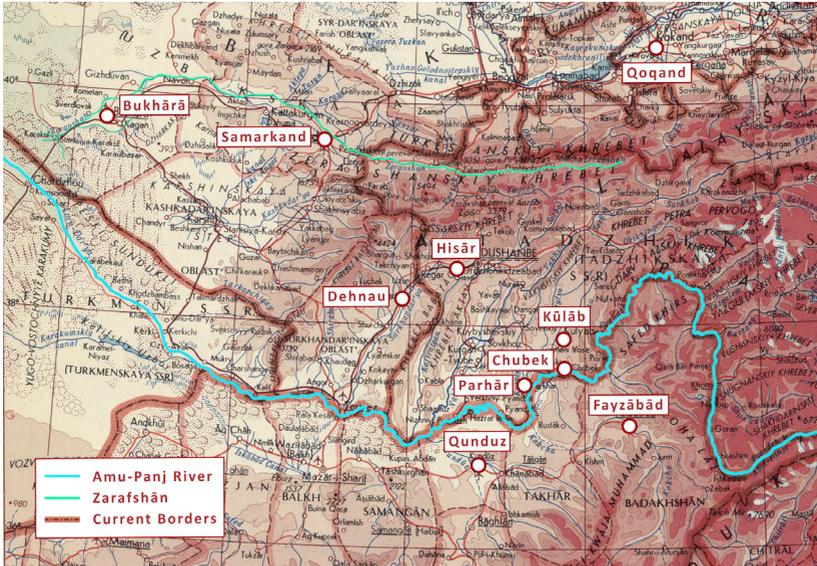
By the late nineteenth century, the Bukharan Emirate nominally stretched from a rather vaguely defined desert border at around Kukertli² (Evans 1984, 101) or Bossagy (Olufsen 1911, 3) in the west to the Pamir range in the east and the region of Merv in the south (see Map).³ In the south/south-east it previously also included—at least temporarily—parts of today's Afghanistan. In practice, however, the mountainous provinces stretching from the town of Urgut (east of Samarkand) further to the (south)-east (an area which mostly matches today's central and southern Tajikistan) were mostly independent. They were collectively known to Bukharans and outsiders as Kūhīstān (i.e. Land of Mountains) or as Eastern Bukhara, and their inhabitants had the reputation of fiercely resisting central control (Manz 1994, 9; Wilde 2016, 209–210). In Russian, Uzbek, and Tajik literature, the Bukharan provinces are usually called *bekstvo* (Russian), *beklik* (Uzbek), and *begī/begīgarī* (Tajik). These are derivations of the word *bek*, which means a provincial ruler. Although the ubiquitous use of these terms suggests an emic origin, Andreas Wilde (2013, 279–280) has convincingly shown that they were introduced by Russian colonisers who, against the backdrop of European nation state ideology, could not imagine the provinces as anything other than territorially delineated administrative units. In fact, the designation is never used in sources from the Emirate itself; in nineteenth-century documents and manuscripts all localities are called either *vilāyat* (province, principality) or *tūmān* (district);⁴ the terms *beklik* and *begī/begīgarī* are retranslations from the Russian. To represent the terminology from colonial, Soviet, and contemporary Central Asian writings, the English neologism *bekdom* is used.⁵ Political authority was established and maintained through network ties, personal allegiances, the exchange of favours and loyalty. While all of these depended on material resources, they did not rest on notions of territoriality (ibid., 279–280). Even if the degree of independence enjoyed temporarily by Eastern Bukharan provinces was considerable, the clustering of smaller principalities around a local capital city in order to avoid close

2 Ruins remain close to the modern Uzbek settlement of Gugurtli on the banks of the Amu River.

3 The question of a consistent transcription remained a challenge in this article. I use the scientific transliteration for all names that are mentioned in original sources. If an established English variant exists, it is used. Names that come from secondary literature are also reproduced in this simplified version, since not all of them could be traced back to an original spelling.

4 A *tūmān* was usually a spatial entity administratively organised around the major irrigation canals and fortified settlements (*gal'a*) (Wilde 2013, 279, note 46).

5 In Russian sources, the term is ubiquitous, see for the context of this article e.g. Khamraev 1959; Yusupov 1964. Qushmatov (1996), Ghoibov (2006), Pirumshoev (2008) and Holzwarth (2010, 28) use its Tajik equivalents.



Map 1: Map of the Amu-Panj River region

central control was not unusual in the region, but was also attested for areas under more concentrated direct central control (ibid., 269). The provincial spatial entities in Eastern Bukhara may be regarded as “little kingdoms” given their semi-autonomous character and their integration into networks of similar little kingdoms.⁶ One of these was Kūlāb in today’s southern Tajikistan.

Eastern Bukhara did not have a large city that could act as a regional political and commercial centre of the whole region. Given the rugged landscape, the region’s political and economic power was instead concentrated in several secondary cities, the most important being Hisār, Kūlāb, Darvāz, Qarātegin, Baljuvān, and Qurghānteppa. These formed a network of secondary cities responsible for administrative operations on a local scale. In his delineation of secondary cities, Stephen Morillo argued that these cities existed simultaneously in two structures, one being networks and the other hierarchies. Networks consist of commercial ties linking small cities to other small cities, larger cities, centres, and ultimately to the global economy (Morillo 2008, 18–23). This was the situation in Eastern Bukhara. In Morillo’s view, the networks were politically non-hierarchical. While there were smaller and larger nodes in the network, the larger ones did not

6 The term “little kingdom” was introduced by Berkemer and Frenz (2003) to designate semi-autonomous domains of local rulers.

attempt to exercise direct political power over the smaller ones (*ibid.*, 19). This does not hold for Eastern Bukhara where—in spite of steady trade and labour relations—secondary cities constantly waged war against each other and vied for supremacy (Iskandarov 1962, 32–33).

Kūlāb had traditionally been the nodal point for routes between Shughnān, Badakhshān, and Qunduz on the one hand, and Hisār (and onwards to Samarkand), Qurghānteppa, Termez (and other westerly points in the lowlands) (Bartold 2002, 346–47). Olufsen (1911, 37), who passed in the late 1890s, called it “a pretty large town” and it was one of the commercial centres of Eastern Bukhara notable for its considerable trade with Afghanistan and India. In the early nineteenth century, Kūlāb—like other local, little kingdoms—had been a bone of contention between the rulers of Qunduz (Afghanistan) and Kokand (Ferghana Valley). The Khan of Kokand, Ālim Khan (ruled 1800–1809), recruited large segments of his army from the little mountain kingdoms of Qarātegīn, Darvāz, Kūlāb, Badakhshān, and Chitral, and appointed his advisors from amongst them (Iskandarov 1962, 35). This was possibly done to reduce the political influence of Uzbek tribal leaders who had constituted the backbone of the Khan’s military until then. P.B. Lord (1808–1840), a British medical doctor and advocate of an aggressive British frontier policy, reported in 1832 that the ruler of Qunduz, Muhammad Murād Bek, had conquered Kūlāb and garrisoned a small contingent of soldiers there. When the city folk rose against him after he left, he returned and brutally extinguished the rebellion. He razed Kūlāb to the ground and deported the inhabitants to a place called Khānābād in the Khazrati Shāh Mountains north of the city (Iskandarov 1962, 42).⁷ In 1833–1834, Kūlāb was again conquered, together with other Eastern Bukharan dominions, by an army sent from the Khanate of Kokand, and Madali Khan subsequently ruled it. After the assassination of the latter in 1842, the principalities regained their *de facto* independence. Constant wars between the little kingdoms finally served as a pretext for the Bukharan army to intervene. Their successive submission was at least partly an effort of the Bukharan Emir, Muzaffar, to compensate for his loss of power in other places. The conquest and subsequent firm integration of Eastern Bukhara into the Emirate’s domain took place against the backdrop of the Russian colonial advance and the unfolding of the Great Game. After Samarkand, the second city of the Emirate, had surrendered to the Tsarist army in 1868, the Amir of Bukhara had to negotiate a treaty that ceded Samarkand and the fertile Zarafshan river

7 This name occurs several times in Central Asia. This place is not to be confused with Khānābād in northern Tajikistan (Sughd province) or towns of the same name in the Uzbek Ferghana Valley and the Qashqadaryo province in southern Uzbekistan.

valley to the Russian Empire. The Russian army in turn assisted the Amir in consolidating his power and bringing the unruly Eastern Bukharan regions back under his control.

The defeats and the following degradation of status from a quasi-autonomous little kingdom with its own political and economic centre to a principality of secondary order also shifted notions of centre and periphery in Kūlāb. Like other border regions in the Pamir and Karakoram region, Eastern Bukhara and its less important provinces like Kūlāb were conceived as marginal from the viewpoint of their respective political and economic centres like Bukhara or Kabul, yet these regions were spaces in their own right in that they were “inhabited by a diversity of often-fluid communities, as well as shifting identity formations” (Marsden et al. 2011, 4). Economic and educational ties were oriented more towards secondary cities in today’s Afghanistan (e.g. Qunduz), Pakistan (e.g. Peshawar, Chitral), and Eastern Bukhara than towards the nominal political centre Bukhara City; these connections informed local identity.

By the early twentieth century, Kūlāb was a modest town and seat of government for the province of the same name. The traveller R. Yu. Rozhevich, who visited the town in spring 1906 on a mission for the Russian Imperial Geographic Society, noted its large gardens and wooden buildings with ridged roofs, and positively remarked upon its rudimentary pavement as a first step towards civilisation (Rozhevich 1908, 620–621). According to visitors’ estimates, the city’s population numbered between twenty-five thousand (Iskandarov 1963, 7) and sixty or eighty thousand people (cf. Yusupov 1964, 13). The town itself consisted of seventeen residential quarters (*guzar*) (Kolpakov 1954). To its south, the province had swampy soils, which were well suited to rice cultivation but prone to flooding and epidemics like malaria. Its rice cultivating peasant population was relatively prosperous and produced a considerable annual surplus, which generated tax revenue for the province. The relative prosperity, as well as the integration of the rice cultivators into long distance trade, may be one reason why the inhabitants of the riparian zones abstained from participating in the great peasant rebellions in this area during the late nineteenth century (Iskandarov 1988, 28). The Russian traveller Varygin, however, who visited Kūlāb around 1905, made no effort to hide his disdain for these lowlands, which he described as boring marshlands lost in reed, void of people in the streets because they spent their days up to their knees in rice fields (Varygin 1916, 780). He contrasted the rice cultivating villages with those in the northern hills and mountains; houses, fields, and gardens in the uphill regions of Kūlāb were more to his liking, with broad, clean streets and well-kept, fenced gardens (ibid., 781–782).

Other foreign travellers to the region were more attentive to the widespread poverty in the mountainous regions (cf. Yusupov 1964, 48, 94; also Mukhtarov 1988a, 26). Especially in the mountainous regions, cultivable land was scarce and animal husbandry was at subsistence level. Cattle were often driven over long distances to adequate pastures, sometimes as far as the Obi Khingau⁸ pastures in the northern principality of Darvāz, while the inhabitants of the mountainous regions travelled to Kūlāb, Kokand, or even Bukhara in winter in search of paid work (Johnston 1892).

It was its geographic position as a node between Afghanistan, Chitral, and India on the one side and Bukhara, Samarkand, Kokand, and other towns of Russian Turkestan on the other side that rendered Kūlāb important as a trading point. Although unremarkable in size, it was a reloading point between Afghanistan and Hisār (which lay *en route* to Samarkand) with a buzzing bazaar, a geographic asset that aroused interest in neighbouring rulers to control the area (Borjian 2005). Wolfgang Holzwarth even called the trade relations between Afghan Badakhshān and Kūlāb a kind of miniature of the general Afghan-Bukharan relations (1986, 231). Until around 1870, when Russia started to dominate trade with Eastern Bukhara and Afghan Badakhshān, these regions were predominantly supplied by Indian imports; Kūlāb's main exchange trade article was a breed of horses much in demand in India and larger in size than the horses bred there (Holzwarth 1986, 239). Especially Pashtuns from Bājaur (today FATA territory in north-western Pakistan), who were a highly respected local group, dominated the Indian trade of the region from the middle of the eighteenth century. A number of Pashtuns of various tribal affiliations involved in this trade had settled along the route by the late nineteenth century (Holzwarth 1986, 237). On the other hand, the caravanserais that specifically served communities from Samarkand, Bukhara, and Termez prove that traders and intermediaries from the western provinces of Bukhara were present in Kūlāb (Varygin 1916, 775).

Kūlāb was also of interest as a point of trans-regional transit for migratory workers who often covered considerable distances. For instance, during the summer months, migrant workers from Badakhshān would travel as far as Samarkand for seasonal work, passing Kūlāb on the way (Bartold 2002, 347). Long-distance trade routes between Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent ran from Fayzabad in the Afghan Badakhshān through Zibak, crossed the Dorah or Nuksan passes to Chitral, and continued

8 Obi Khingau, also called Khingov or Khingob, is one of the main tributaries of the Vakhsh River in the Tavildara district. The area has long been important for its alpine pastures.

through Bājaur to Peshawar, which took a caravan about three to four weeks to complete. Other routes continued from Afghanistan through Kūlāb into the Khanate of Kokand and the Alai-mountains. The population and political alliances along the route were extremely segmented, which meant there were additional risks besides the roads' geographical dangers.

Trade in the region deteriorated in the mid-1880s with colonial intervention into borders, routes, trade, and property rights. In 1885, a Russian customs post constrained trade between Fayzābād and Kūlāb. From 1887 onwards, trade through the eastern Hindu Kush route was almost completely blocked by the Afghan side. The relations between the Afghan Emir and the Mehtar of Chitral had deteriorated since the latter agreed to the deployment of a British-Indian political agent at his court and refused to allow his territory to become part of Afghanistan. In fact, the sanctions employed to punish the Mehtar of Chitral most severely affected the Bājaur traders, as well as regions such as Badakhshān, Qataghān, and Kūlāb, since the Mehtar already received British subsidies to compensate for the loss. The colonial powers considered the entire Panj-Amu River as a quasi-natural frontier to demarcate their respective zones of influence. This perspective informed the difficult border negotiations that took place in the 1870s and the 1880s between the British and the Russian Empire and resulted in the border that, for the most part, is still in place today. As can be deduced from settlement patterns or tribal formations, e.g. in the Badakhshān/Shughnān or Kūlāb/Qunduz regions, delimitation along river courses was not an emic conception; historically, the Panj-Amu River was not perceived as a border among groups of people who considered themselves to be related. It was not uncommon for people who held land or pastures on the opposite river bank to lose property or access once the border was delineated and a border regime was established. The problem had already been addressed in vain by the so-called Gilgit Mission (1885–86), a reconnaissance expedition following the Granville-Gorchakov Agreement of 1873, which had divided the principalities of Darvāz, Shughnān, Roshān, and Wakhān between British Indian and Russian spheres of influence. The mission report found the agreement to be based on heavily distorted perceptions of existing political entities and stated that “[n]othing could have been more indefinite or ill-conceived than this agreement. [. . .] In no case do we find the people on one bank distinct from those on the other.” (Kreutzmann 2015, 218).

In 1895, with the advance concurrence of Afghanistan and Bukhara, Britain and Russia signed an agreement on “the spheres of influence of the two countries in the region of the Pamirs” (Becker 1968, 157). In 1896 Shughnān, Roshān, and northern Vakhān were transferred into Bukharan dominion,

while southern Darvāz went to Afghanistan. Three Russian garrisons were established in Khorog and Vakhān to secure control over Bukhara's easternmost borders (*ibid*; see also Kreutzmann 1996, 101–118). The colonial demarcation and surveillance of the border also blocked traditional trade routes, which had previously always passed Kūlāb rather than the difficult mountain terrain further to the north (Bartold 2002, 346). Kūlāb thus serves as a magnifying lens for recapturing the multi-ethnic, interconnected history of this trans-river region, the use people made of their border space, and the impact of colonialism. The example of this town allows us to access a past that has been pushed to the margins of history in Central Asia, since it does not easily lend itself to the narrative of nation-building.

Avoidance protest: Rural responses to natural hazards, tax regimes, and repression

Scott (1976, 1990) and others have pointed to social arrangements such as (coercive) reciprocity, forced generosity, shared work, and communal resource access as means to secure rural subsistence in pre-colonial societies for many people, most of the time. Times of past crises provide an especially fruitful observation frame because they probe the validity and resilience of these arrangements. Colonial interests and an increasing incorporation of subsistence-oriented communities into export-oriented wage labour, cash crop production, and the global commodity system presented—from a rural point of view—risks to the traditional primacy of food security. If this economic and social reshuffle coincided with natural disasters, the outcome would be devastating (Davis 2000; Serels 2013). Emigration became a political and economic tool employed to negotiate better terms and living conditions (Adas 1986, 64–65). In the Central Asian case, knowledge about these migration movements has partly come down to us in the form of official reports to local or central courts, as well as petitions discussing conditions for return. Unfortunately, these documents are sometimes not dated, often anonymous, and the position of the scribe vis-à-vis the petitioners is not always clear. We do not learn whether the grievances voiced in the petitions really represent the whole spectrum of discomfort. The documents also reveal little about the migrants' social, professional or ethnic background. However, they do provide us with quite clear information about the voiced grievances. Given that they were submitted as petitions, we may assume that the authors considered them legitimate concerns.

In Central Asia, the decades of the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century were marked by rural crises. Changes in climate and natural disasters added to the anthropogenic degradation of the

rural landscape, which was further exacerbated by the violent integration of the eastern little kingdoms into the Bukhara Emirate. The sources available are largely silent about the war-induced consequences of the Bukharan conquests in East Bukhara for the people, the environment, and the economy. Information can only be deduced from scant remarks in the sources, but they point to an enormous setback for the region. Varygin talks in rather general terms about the killing of women and children as well as the destruction of towns, irrigation systems, and even large canals that accompanied the conquest of 1870. The final blow to the little kingdoms of Darvāz and Kūlāb came with the alleged killing of more than half of the population and the displacement of another quarter by the victorious Bukharan army, led by the head of the artillery, Khudāy-Nazar (Borjjan 2013). He was in turn granted the title of Bek of Kūlāb in 1870 and thereafter enjoyed considerable autonomy from the Emir in Bukhara.⁹ The former ruler of Kūlāb, Sary-Khan, crossed the Panj River with many of his supporters and took refuge in Afghanistan (Varygin 1916, 741). Apparently, recovery was not only impeded by the destruction of agricultural infrastructure, but also by the heavy loss of life. Informants told Varygin of roughly 2,750 hectares of land suitable for the cultivation of rice or wheat that apparently was lying fallow since the Bukharan conquest thirty-five years ago (ibid., 781), possibly resulting both from the lack of manpower to work the land and its unclear legal status. However, the formerly tilled fallow land provided a superb breeding habitat for locusts (especially the migratory locust), which would wreak havoc on the fields and pastures of Kūlāb and adjacent regions for years to come.

Excessive tax demands by authorities were a common source of grief. Mīrsaʿīd Maḥmūd, judge of Hisār, mentioned in a letter to the Bukharan Emir ʿAbdulaḥad (reigned 1885–1911) that an array of peasants and tribes (*qavm-u qabīla*) had fled their dismal circumstances under ʿAbdulaḥad’s unpopular, exploitive brother, ʿAbdulmuʾmīn, and settled in the neighbouring districts (*nāhiya*) of Kūlāb, Sarijūy, and Dehнау. After Astanaqul-bek-biy (reigned 1886–1906) was appointed governor of the province, he granted bonuses to would-be returnees and instructed his officials to remain moderate. Within a short period, peasants and

9 The sources present different names for the rulers in Kūlāb after the 1870 conquest. The newspaper *Turkestanskije Vedomosti* (N° 15 1876) stated that all of the highest officials in Eastern Bukhara had been replaced by Bukharan confidants of the Emir. Najm ud-Dīn Khwāja thus became Bek of Kūlāb, the chief conqueror of the Hisār-Kūlāb region, and Yaḳūb Qush-begi was appointed ruler of Hisār (Iskandarov 2012, 133). Varygin (1916, 743), however, says that the first post-conquest Bek of Kūlāb was Sadyq Khwāja, followed by Abdur Raḥmān Sudur. Borjjan (2013) claims that Khudāy-Nazar Ataliq was the chief conqueror and first appointed Bek of Kūlāb.

tribespeople returned and began working the land again (Khamraev 1959, 29–30; Qushmatov 1996, 212).¹⁰

Changes in climate and natural disasters aggravated the war's impact. Several climatologists and geographers have postulated a climate change in Central Asia whose start they situate around the second half of the nineteenth century. Around this time, the humid Little Ice Age in Central Asia that had determined the weather since the beginning of the sixteenth century was replaced by a drier and hotter climate (Berg 1955; Esper et al. 2002; Chen et al. 2006, 2010; Narama et al. n. d.). Indeed, East Bukhara saw a sequence of weather extremes during these decades. Several unusually hard winters in the 1880s decimated animal stocks and after a number of crop failures due to drought and a locust plague originating in Afghanistan, 1884 was the single year of relief with a good harvest. The year 1885 and the beginning of 1886 saw another heavy winter, which took its toll on livestock; the following summer was also too cold and wet. The years 1889 and 1893 were very dry; drought in combination with an over-cultivation of cotton and grain led to famine in some areas in 1893 (Anonymous 1893). On May 10, 1903, torrential downpours caused large-scale destruction of houses and infrastructure in the town of Kūlāb and resulted in the death of six people and numerous livestock (Yusupov 1964, 95). Between the late 1890s and early 1910s, a locust plague of an enormous scale afflicted peasants in Kūlāb and neighbouring provinces. Rozhevich (1908, 624) reported in 1906 that the region around Kūlāb had suffered from locusts for eight successive years. Around the same time, a silkworm disease in Kūlāb had seriously affected silk production—one of its main domestic industries (Yusupov 1964, 52). The locusts spread without obstruction through the lowlands, ate all the wheat and spared only the flax and rice as it was protected by the water in the paddies (Varygin 1916, 760). Some areas like Hisār and Kūlāb were not able to harvest wheat for dozens of years (Semēnov 1988, 33; Varygin 1916, 795); Baljuvān had to import rice to make up for the loss of other cereals (Varygin 1916, 760).

All these factors contributed to an increased vulnerability of the rural population that largely relied on subsistence agriculture. The prevailing system of taxes and revenues was flexible enough in theory to accommodate adaptation to economic crises; a rigidly stratified but paternalistic state could (and indeed did) sometimes intervene in food markets to protect its subjects or at least show lenience when the population struggled to pay their

10 Both authors refer to document CSARUz 1–126, op. 1, d. 541, fol. 38 which was, unfortunately, not accessible to me.

dues.¹¹ Alexander Morrison (2008, 179) mentions a petition sent in 1900 by 160 villagers out of gratitude for their local elder, who had taken out a loan in order to see them through a critical period caused by a late rice harvest. Two documents published by Mukhsinova (1959, 96–98) attest to the intercession of the local judge in the town of Denau in 1886 through 1887 on behalf of villagers and townspeople who had protested against unfair tax assessment and fraudulent tax collectors.¹² It seems, however, that at the turn of the twentieth century, local and higher-ranking authorities misjudged the situation in many cases and ran afoul of popular conceptions concerning rights to subsistence and a morally grounded social justice. High taxes in combination with bad harvests and natural disasters quickly threatened the subsistence of the peasants and pastoralists, as most of them had no savings. Popular discontentment with deteriorating living conditions took different forms, from evasive practices to open rebellion. Usually the visible, violent acts of rebellion are most prominent in history writing as well as in popular memory (Madzhlisov 1959, 98–109; Mukhtarov 1988a, 27–29, 1988b, 36–41; Semënov 1988, 33).¹³ Much more frequent than demonstrative acts of resistance, however, was avoidance protest, also called the daily *routine resistance* (Scott 1990, 255). Besides foot-dragging and the withholding or hiding of harvest and livestock from tax collectors, emigration was a fairly common form of avoidance protest.

Crop failure and the loss of animal stocks were often not reflected in the rate of taxes, which remained unchanged or even rose. There was, for instance, an annual surcharge called *tūl* on top of the usual tax on livestock, which was meant to reflect the normal herd increase through lambing (Holzwarth 2011, 248, note 142). Yet livestock was not necessarily counted each year, which led to heavy distortions of the tax burden. A Russian observer noted that a man who had been left with only forty sheep in 1883 due to heavy loss in livestock was still registered and taxed as the owner of 160 sheep (Holzwarth 2011, 242, note 110). While pleas for reassessment could be filed, they were not always well received (*ibid.*, 241). If petitioning failed, one strategy that afflicted people resorted to was tax evasive emigration. Around 1886, Raḥmān-Qul, governor of Qarāteḡīn and supervisor of the *zakāt* collection in East Bukhara, reported that many families from

11 This can be gleaned from, among others, a series of petitions and edicts from 1914 concerning food shortages and food speculation in the Chārjūy district, see CSARUZ 1–126, op. 1, d. 1010.

12 The article refers to CSARUZ 1–126, op. 1, d.101, fols. 1 and 2.

13 Especially the large so-called uprising of Vāse‘ in Baljuvān and Kūlāb (around 1887/1888) inspired a series of heroic poetry and lamentation songs. See Ma’sumī 1988; B. Shermuhammadov 1988; and Asrorī and Amonov 1980, 110–120.

Kūlāb and Baljuvān who had lost animals during the winter, and were overburdened with taxes, had fled across the Amu River into Afghanistan to evade the Bukharan tax collectors.¹⁴ An anonymous plea for reassessment from around that time claimed that while herds had not been counted in about ten years, taxes had risen annually, causing those who had lost their herds to cross the Amu River for tax evasion reasons.¹⁵

Similarly, motivated outmigration is documented in the Wakhān region of the Bukharan Emirate and Afghan Badakhshan during the nineteenth century (Kreutzmann 1996, 79–118 and 2015, 220–262; see also Becker 1968, 215–218). Kreutzmann (2015, 248, 250, 252, 254, 256, 260, 262) shows seventy-seven cases of documented Pamirian evasions and migrations between 1888 and 1915. Roughly half of these named “oppression,” “dissatisfaction,” or tax-related reasons as a catalyst. A further eighteen cases were related to voluntary or forced return, and six additional cases concerned released slaves or otherwise formerly captured individuals. The 1880s and 1890s saw a massive influx of refugees from Afghan territories to Kūlāb. By mid-1886, nearly seven hundred families were reported to have left Badakhshan for Kūlāb and another two hundred for Yarkand (in East Turkestan) or Hunza. The report goes on to say that the governors of the latter two places had refused to return the refugees by force, but instead had furnished them with seed grain and houses upon arrival. Sardār Abdullā Jān, then governor of Afghan Badakhshān and Khānabā, accused the Bukharan government of luring his subjects away. A report from 1886 states “Bokhara officials instigate the people of Badakhshan to migrate to Bokhara territory.” Sardār Abdullā Jān thus issued strict orders that neither his nor Bukharan subordinates were allowed to cross to the other side. (Kreutzmann 2015, 220–221). In 1897, more than seven hundred families left South Darvāz (on the Afghan side) to seek their fortune in North Darvāz, Kūlāb, and Qarātegīn after their home territories had been allotted to the Afghan Emir in the Anglo-Russian Pamir Border Agreement of 1895. By July 1898, the number had risen to 1,164 families. In 1897, Afghan authorities threatened to expel the remaining relatives of the fugitives if they did not return. This resulted in 103 expatriate individuals finding themselves trapped on an island in the middle of the river because the Bukharan authorities refused them entry. Only after the Russian post at Khorog interceded were the expatriates allowed entry into Shughnān (Becker 1968, 158). In the aftermath, one part of their former pastures in South Darvāz was used as state pasture and another part was taken over by

14 See Holzwarth 2011, 248. He refers to CSARUz 1–126, op. 1, d. 1271, fol. 42.

15 See Holzwarth, *ibid.* He refers to CSARUz 1–126, op. 1, d. 764, fol. 2.

Arab livestock keepers who had left Bukhara around 1870 (Kreutzmann 2015, 252, note 20; see also Barfield 1981, 24). Motivated by this significant emigration, the Afghan Amir Abdur Raḥmān Khan proclaimed a three-year pause in tax collection in Badakhshan, to be followed by moderate taxes in accordance with Islamic law. Within a month of the announcement, nine thousand people opted to return to Afghanistan, setting off a bureaucratic tug-of-war between the local administrations on both sides about the people's right to choose where they settle. Behind this controversy was the deterioration of tax conditions for the local population on the Bukharan side. After the Russian authorities had taken a full census in Wakhan, Shughnan, and Roshan, Bukharan tax collectors started to take the tithe from August 1900 onwards. On top of the taxes, the Russian military personnel garrisoned in this geostrategic sensitive area apparently requisitioned livestock and other supplies from the population at nominal prices, thus adding to discontentment. However, the Afghan promise of tax exemption was not kept. By October 1900, Afghan tax officials were collecting tithes on livestock in Wakhan (Kreutzmann 2015, 255).

In relation to local population numbers, this trans-river migration was a large-scale phenomenon that was only possible thanks to the availability of sufficient plots of uncultivated land on both sides, as Mann et al. note (2012, 19). The emigration from Bukharan dominions peaked in the years 1902 to 1904, leaving many villages on this side of the Panj-Amu River deserted (Yusupov 1964, 84). Often, temporary migrations were spurred by a combination of natural and administrative nuisances. From the perspective of the central government, Kūlāb was located in a marginal geographical space, but local people were able to turn this marginality into an asset. After taking refuge on the other side, they bartered with their former authorities about the conditions of their return. The riparian zones in East Bukhara were especially an area of intensive bidirectional movement of people, animals, and goods. There were several river crossings along the Panj-Amu River in that region, the most important ones being Beshkapa, Chubek, Parhār, Bakha, and Bohorak (Varygin 1916, 753).¹⁶ Passage was not easy, however, and the riparian zones were prone to flooding in the summer when the snow in the mountains at high altitudes began to melt, making the passage between the boroughs of Chubek and Parhār impossible.¹⁷ Nevertheless, people managed to get to the other side. Chubek served as nodal point for migration with either large numbers of immigrants from Afghanistan or emigration resulting in deserted villages on the Bukharan side, depending

16 Customs control points were installed at Chubek and Bohorak as well, see Yusupov 1964, 80.

17 CSARUz 1–126, op. 1, d. 985.

on the political situation. A newspaper article from 1904 described the situation as follows:

Whenever there come hard times of unrest in Afghanistan or there happens to be a particularly hard-hearted ruler, masses of people flee across the Amu Darya and flood Chubek; if on the opposite, in Bukhara the ruler of the *bekdom* of Kūlāb turns out to be particularly demanding and acquisitive, the inhabitants of Chubek are the first to flee to Badakhshān and the village will be deserted (S.A. 1904).

People migrated with most or all of their belongings. On February 23, 1898, the chief customs officer of the Turkestan district noted that during the night between January 26 and 27, thirty men, thirty-three women, and twenty-seven children had crossed the River Panj into the Bukharan Emirate at Parhār, together with their domestic belongings, sixty horses, and one hundred horned cattle.¹⁸ Although the dispersal of people, livestock, and mobile goods for tax evasion was in no way restricted to border regions proper, it was here that prospects for positive outcomes for dissatisfied peasants and livestock breeders were the most promising. This was first and foremost due to both governments' fear of empty, uninhabited border zones. Consequently, there are examples where local authorities intervened in favour of the angered rural population and thus prevented further unrest. Between 1886 and 1888, when peasants in the town of Denau gathered to protest against certain tax collectors who demanded excessive extra taxes, the local ruler (*hākīm*) Almas-bii stepped in and asked the central government to relieve the population of unjust taxes.¹⁹ The issue was apparently settled without much further ado.²⁰ Holzwarth (2011, 249–250) convincingly argues that the reassessment of tax burdens and interventions on behalf of the population were motivated less by benevolence on the part of local authorities, and more by an instinct for power. In a political environment where military power could partly be secured through militias consisting of local nobilities and tribal units, good relations as established through concessions in tax affairs could be a decisive asset in the hands of local power holders.

18 Yusupov 1964, 16.

19 Injustice is a recurrent theme in the petitions. If we are to trust these sources, the rural population was not averse to paying taxes but objected to those they perceived as not being in line with “traditional proceedings.” There is a strong “moral economy” argumentation in many petitions concerned with this issue.

20 Almas-bii was appointed *hākīm* of Denau on September 30, 1886 and quit this office on August 9, 1888. The incident must have taken place within this period. See Mukhsinova 1959 for a description and a facsimile of the documents.

Population policy in the border region

Generally speaking, population numbers were comparatively low in the border region: records from the years 1914 to 1916 speak of 635 settlements in Kūlāb, compared to 1,420 further to the north in neighbouring Baljuvān (Mukhamedjanov 2001, 5). In order to attract new inhabitants to the border zones, newcomers from Afghan Badakhshan were granted much more favourable terms of taxation than the autochthonous population of the region; sometimes they paid just a quarter of the dues normally levied per farm (Varygin 1916, 792–793). Rozhevich noted that some villages close to Kūlāb consisted almost exclusively of Afghans who had left their country (Rozhevich 1908, 619), very probably to escape unfavourable tax terms there.

By the early twentieth century, a substantial group (at least 269 villages) of immigrants from Afghan Badakhshān, Qataghān-Uzbeks from the area of Qunduz, and refugees from Kabul (who apparently commuted between Kabul and Kūlāb) and Hazara settled on the south-eastern stretch of the Kūlāb principality (Varygin 1916, 769–770). They were seemingly granted their own kind of local governance as they could choose their elders (called *shāh*) from among themselves to decide local issues. Kavolo, the name of a quarter on the eastern outskirts of the town of Kūlāb, also hinted at the predominance of immigrants from Afghanistan. The name Kavolo (or Kavol) was the denomination of a group of Afghan gypsies (*lūlī*) who conducted trade between Kūlāb, Samarkand, Bukhara, and Afghanistan (Kolpakov 1954, 75) and had a rather recent immigration history dating to the late nineteenth century as remembered by themselves and their neighbours (Oranskii 1983, 23–24). Russian observers and the non-Kavol local population also referred to them as Afghan or Indian *lūlī*. Numbering around four hundred individuals, they were strictly set apart from other gypsy immigrants in the same quarter. Called Marvon (from Marv, today Mary in Turkmenistan), they came from Russian Turkestan. If—given the numbers above—between 269 and 299 of the 635 settlements in Kūlāb had Afghan immigrant populations, they would have comprised more than one-third to almost half of all settlements in this province.

As depopulated border zones meant a risk for the Bukharan government, it repeatedly tried to persuade the refugees to return. Yusupov mentions a competition between local governors of the Bukharan and the Afghan side during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to attract the disgruntled population to their respective territory by promising various privileges—the promises were, however, seldom kept (Yusupov 1964, 15; see also Kreutzmann 2015, 255). Inhabitants of Chubek (today Moskovskii), a large village on the Bukharan side of the Amu River, for instance, occasionally

migrated to Afghan Badakhshān, while population figures in Kūlāb rose thanks to immigration from Russian Turkestan and Afghanistan (*ibid.*, 16). The ruler of Kūlāb, Raḥmatullā-bii, for instance, offered inhabitants from the Afghan border region who were willing to migrate to the East Bukharan side a “place granted by his Majesty [i.e. the Amir of Bukhara], [. . .] land and water.”²¹ At least occasionally, formal negotiations and agreements preceded migration. In a document from the Qushbegi of the Bukharan Emirate written in 1898, a certain Muḥammad Mingbāshi is mentioned, who had asked the Bek of Kūlāb for permission to immigrate from Afghanistan with his people. Upon receiving a positive answer, Muḥammad Mingbāshi crossed the river at Parhār with thirty families and settled in the nearby village of Shūrtūpa.²²

The fear of permanently losing control over some sparsely populated areas was well founded, as can be seen in a case concerning the island of Darkāt. Situated amidst a branching of the Panj River, the headwater regions of the Amu River had been mainly used as pasture by herders from both sides. An undated petition from Eastern Bukhara complained that individuals from the Afghan Badakhshān and Qataghān provinces had approached the governor of the Bukharan province (*vilāyat*) of Kūlāb and demanded that the island be handed over to the Afghan state (*ba hukūmat-i Afghānistān*) or it would be taken by military force.²³ The intrusion was eventually successful—the contested island was allotted to Afghanistan during the colonial border negotiations and today belongs to Afghanistan’s Takhār Province.

Besides security concerns for possible outside intrusions into unpopulated areas, fallow lands and neglected irrigation systems were prone to devaluation. Untilled fields meant tax loss, but more worrisome were the efforts in terms of work and financial means required to put these lands back into agricultural use. Fallow lands whose farmers had fled in the wake of the Bolshevik takeover and the ensuing civil war continually troubled the authorities. The fertile riparian cropland was quickly reclaimed by alluvial forest (*tūqay*) and reed. Untilled and unirrigated fields were furthermore an ideal hatchery for locusts, as described above. In continuation

21 CSARUz f. 1, op. 29, d. 1104, fol. 1.

22 CSARUz f. 1, op. 29, d. 1259, fol. 54. Mingbāshi is the title of a local leader, literally head of one thousand [persons].

23 CSARUz 1–126, op. 1, d. 223.

of the established practice, a decree was issued by Fayzulla Khojaev²⁴ and two other authorities as late as 1925, granting a right to return, restitution of all former lands, a hassle-free life, financial aid to re-cultivate the land, a one-year tax exemption, and other amenities.²⁵ However, the question of repatriation of peasants who had migrated to Afghanistan either before the revolution or in anticipation of the coming Soviet rule continued to be discussed in local newspapers throughout the mid-1920s.²⁶ Especially in the border regions of Kūlāb and Qurghān-Tepa, which greatly suffered from the civil war, this emigration continued into the early 1930s (Penati 2007, 527–528, 530). The appeals to return, however, seem to have been at least partly successful. The writer and journalist Egon Erwin Kisch, a member and long-time emissary of the Communist International, wrote in a report on his visit to the region that the majority of five hundred families from the small Ārāl Island in the Amu River who had fled to Afghanistan in 1925 had returned by 1926, attracted by the promise of credit, water allocation, tools, and construction material. They had even brought some Afghans along with them (Kisch 1946, 57). Penati (2007, 530) writes that returnees (ten thousand families in 1925) were not always well received, and were regarded with some suspicion. They were provided with seeds and food, but only half of them received agricultural tools.

Administrative plans to invite immigrants in order to secure their settlement in the border areas did not always yield the intended results. To achieve better control over borders and migration, Kyrgyz tribes were settled at the riverside in 1895 as frontier guards. Besides the Kyrgyz, 410 families from the Afghan part of Darvāz were lured into the Bukharan border region with the consent of the Bek of Darvāz and settled there in September 1897. Only fifty of the very poorest and landless peasants stayed in the immediate border region, however, while the rest moved on to the lowland swaths of Kūlāb. In November, some three hundred families came over from Afghanistan but only one hundred of them stayed in Bukharan Darvāz;

24 Born in Bukhara in 1896, he was one of the leading figures of the Central Asian reform movement. Between 1920 and 1937, he held several high posts in the Bukharan Peoples' Republic and after the integration of its territory into the SSSR he held a chair in the Uzbek Sovnarkom (Council of the People's Commissars). During the Stalin purges, he was dismissed from duty in June 1937 and executed as an enemy of the people and counterrevolutionary in 1938 after the Great Purge Trial in Moscow.

25 See Anonymous 1925 and Bashir Z. 1925 in the newspaper Qizil O'zbekiston, March 9 and October 23 respectively. Cf. also Penati 2007, 525 on this issue.

26 Cf. Anonymous, Qizil O'zbekiston, Mar. 9, 1925, Bashir, Z., Qizil O'zbekiston, Oct. 23, 1925, Anonymous, Qizil O'zbekiston, Dec. 1, 1926. Most contributions to these newspapers were written under pseudonyms or anonymously.

the others continued to Kūlāb and Qarātegīn (Yusupov 1964, 16).²⁷ In spite of all efforts to claim territory by settling peasants and installing border guards, the border remained easily traversable—and people continued to migrate in both directions—until it was sealed following the establishment of Soviet power in the area.

Populations on both sides of the river had lived under and arranged themselves with a “mediated state” which was characterised by a system where local authorities were largely left alone as long as they extracted and remitted taxes, provided military personnel, and did not challenge higher-ranking officials or the ruling elite.²⁸ The central state had very little means to exert direct power over much of its hinterland. In spite of all the efforts to keep the riparian zones populated, it does not seem that authorities ever seriously attempted to inhibit the flow of people and goods over the Panj-Amu River; and it is questionable whether they would have been able to do so, had they tried. In border regions like Kūlāb, the trans-river orientation created a space of continuously shared culture and economy even under different political regimes. This simultaneous presence of a shared space and separate political entities was the main lever that rendered trans-river avoidance migration more effective than elsewhere. While the migrants had access to and shared family or ethnic bonds with the host communities on the other river side, their refuge was also politically a safe place to make decisions about their future return or integration. Only the consolidation of Soviet rule and its administrative and military capacity to effectively control the border finally turned Kūlāb from a regional centre into a peripheral border region.

Conclusion

The continuous trans-river migration of apparently even larger family units with their flocks and bulk luggage points to the existence of established networks to facilitate journeys and lodging upon arrival. Evading excessive taxes and negotiating arrangements for their return were to some degree effective measures in the hands of the poorer population to pressure authorities for better conditions. This implied the involvement of mediators such as community elders, local authorities, recognised prominent individuals, and others, who negotiated on behalf of the different stakeholders (see Holzwarth 2011). Migration as a recurrent resort was only possible because there was enough unclaimed land available on both sides

27 CSARUz f. 1, op. 29, d. 1259, fols. 28 and 34.

28 The term “mediated state” follows Wilde (2016, 35).

of the river. This prevented competition or fighting over scarce resources for much of the nineteenth century. The trans-river, trans-border aspect of evasive migration in the Panj-Amu River riparian region proved to be an additional asset to the migrants. With colonial powers successively encroaching upon spaces like Kūlāb, indigenous rulers were likewise pushed to demonstrate their claim to certain territories by stabilising the border and the border population. They were thus more inclined to respond to evasive practices of discontented populations in border regions than in other parts. Tax evasive migration in interior parts of the Emirate seem by contrast to have provoked little in terms of negotiations for better tax and living terms. Sadriddin Aini, an eminent writer who was born in 1878 in a village some dozen kilometres away from the city of Bukhara, recalled in his commemorations how his rural fellow villagers dispersed into far-off areas to evade ever-increasing tax demands, with some even ending as vagrants in Russian Turkestan for want of other opportunities (Aini 1998, 182–183). Burhan Sharaf, a Tatar newspaper editor travelling to Bukhara in 1910, likewise noted deserted lands—predominantly state lands—which tenants had left in the face of excessive tax demands (Sharaf 2014, 15). Contrary to the situation in the riparian zones, these developments in the heartland of the Emirate do not seem to have provoked much official response.

Migration as evasive practice came with its own risks. Abandoned fields and irrigation systems quickly deteriorated and demanded labour-intensive efforts for revaluation. Fallow grounds furthermore provided ideal breeding conditions for locusts. The first to suffer from the frequent locust outbreaks during the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth century were again the farmers and pastoralists. Concerns that the locusts might travel further into Russian lands even reached the Russian and later Soviet authorities, who usually showed little interest in the internal affairs of the Emirate. Agreements for tax alleviation were more often than not disregarded after the return of the migrants, which led to a trans-river circle of emigration and repatriation. Authorities could furthermore pit different groups of migrating populations against one another by granting alleviation selectively. They could also refuse re-migration if they chose to keep certain populations away. Similarly, barring return could be used as a measure of collective punishment (Kreutzmann 1996). Evasive protest was thus not a weapon exclusively in the hands of the weak, as Scott had already noted, but could also be turned against them (Scott 1990).

This weapon of the weak also increasingly collided with changing concepts and ideas of nation, state sovereignty, and border regimes. The nineteenth and early twentieth-century European conceptions of states and of large rivers

as quasi-natural borders, which the British and the Russian Empires imposed on that region, did not leave any leeway for mobile populations and fluctuating borders. The spread of similar, multi-ethnic riparian populations within a region whose layout facilitated movements gradually came to be seen as an obstacle to nascent nation-building projects. Colonial interventions into trade, the installation of new customs and border posts, and trade sanctions cut right through the region's main network arteries and advanced the gradual political and economic marginalisation of the riparian region from the 1880s onwards. The enforcement of the border regime, however, would eventually demand considerable dedication in terms of finance, manpower, military equipment, and law enforcement from the Soviet side.

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Illustrations

Map 1: Map of the Amu-Panj River region

Source: “U.S.S.R. - Central Asia,” *East Pergamon World Atlas* (Poland: Pergamon Press, Ltd., 1967). Retrieved from the David Rumsey Map Collection, © 2000 by Cartography Associates. <https://www.davidrumsey.com>. [Accessed on 20. September 2017]. Modified by C. Roden, Editorial Office, Transcultural Studies.

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