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Тел.: +7 (727) 261-67-19, +7 (727) 272-47-59

E-mail: [edu.history@bk.ru](mailto:edu.history@bk.ru)

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Тел.: +7 (727) 261-67-19, +7 (727) 272-47-59

Е-mail: [edu.history@bk.ru](mailto:edu.history@bk.ru)

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**DIPLOMATIC POLICY OF SULTAN ABLAI IN THE BORDER AREA (1730s–1740s)**

*Olzhas Kuanbay*<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD student of the Ankara University  
(Sihye, Altyndag, 06100 Ankara, Republic of Turkey)  
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2079-1084>. E-mail: [olkube89@gmail.com](mailto:olkube89@gmail.com)

\*Corresponding author

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**Abstract.** *Introduction.* Sultan Ablai, showcasing his diplomatic prowess in challenging domestic and international circumstances, took exhaustive measures and significant efforts to safeguard the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Kazakh state. In a bid to secure personal safety and maintain the state's sovereignty, Ablai Sultan refrained from visiting the capital of the Russian Empire. Instead, he actively engaged in diplomatic exchanges with the imperial center and regional hubs like Orenburg and Omsk, either dispatching his emissaries or correspondences. After the conquest of Siberia, when the southern borders of the Russian Empire came close to the northern, northeastern and eastern borders of the Kazakh Khanate, diplomatic interactions between the Kazakhs and Russian authorities experienced a noticeable resurgence. These exchanges primarily occurred through the border administration of Western Siberia, involving cities like Tobolsk and Omsk, and also through the serf commanders. *Goals and objectives.* The purpose of this study is to identify diplomatic activities from the historical context, as well as to determine the development, content, and nature of the diplomatic policy of Sultan Ablai in the border zone of the 1930s–1940s. *Results.* Sultan Ablai, commencing his political journey by overseeing the modest Atygai ulus of the Argyn tribe, placed significant emphasis on fostering Kazakh-Russian relations. This aspect of the Kazakh ruler's foreign policy is evident in various historical sources, comprising diverse messages directed towards representatives of the highest authorities, officials from the capital administration, as well as leaders in Orenburg and Siberia. The issues Ablai addressed in his letters, conveyed through his personal envoys, varied depending on the recipient's rank. Sultan (Khan) Ablai engaged with Russia through interactions with the highest Russian officials, including privy councilors, civil servants, fortress commanders, and governors-general in Siberia and Orenburg, as well as the empress herself. *Conclusions.* Sultan Ablai addressed regional Russian officials on a range of issues, including the extensive theft of Kazakh horses by Russians, Bashkirs, and Cossacks. He also brought up various incidents of theft, concerns about Kazakhs unlawfully held in fortresses, and the possibility of exchanging them for Russian individuals residing among the Kazakhs. He urged the fortress commanders to put an end to the mutual raids between the Kazakhs and Russians and join forces against the Dzungars. Ablai also played a crucial



role in fostering trade and bolstering political and diplomatic connections.

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**Keywords:** Ablai sultan, foreign policy, diplomacy, border area, Kazakhs, Dzungars, Kazakh Khanate, Russian Empire


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## АБЫЛАЙ СҰЛТАННЫҢ ШЕКАРАЛЫҚ АЙМАҚТАҒЫ ДИПЛОМАТИЯЛЫҚ САЯСАТЫ (XVIII ҒАСЫРДЫҢ 30–40 ЖЖ.)

Олжас Бекенұлы Қуанбай<sup>1\*</sup>

Анкара Университетінің PhD докторанты

(Сыхие, Алтындаг, 06100. Анкара қ., Түркия Республикасы)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2079-1084>. E-mail: [olkube89@gmail.com](mailto:olkube89@gmail.com)

\*Автор-корреспондент

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**Аңдатпа.** *Kіріспе.* Абылай сұлтан дарынды дипломат ретінде өте қиын ішкі және халықаралық саяси жағдайларда Қазақ мемлекетінің егемендігі мен аумақтық тұтастығын сақтау жолында барлық күш-жігерін жұмсады. Мемлекеттің қауіпсіздігі мен тәуелсіздігін қамтамасыз ету мақсатында Абылай сұлтан Ресей империясының астанасына бірде-бір рет бармаған. Абылай империяның орталығымен және оның Орынбор, Омбы сияқты облыс орталықтарымен белсенді дипломатиялық байланыс жасап, жақындарын сол жаққа жіберіп, хат алмасып отырды. Ресей империясы Сібірді жаулап алғаннан кейін империяның оңтүстік шекаралары Қазақ хандығының солтүстік, солтүстік-шығыс және шығыс шекараларына жақындай түсті. Осы уақытта қазақтар мен Ресей билігі арасындағы дипломатиялық байланыстар айтарлықтай жанданып, Батыс Сібір шекаралық басқару, Тобыл, Омбы қалалары, сондай-ақ крепостной иелері арқылы байланыстар жүзеге асырылды. *Зерттеудің мақсаты мен міндеттері.* Зерттеудің мақсаты – тарихи контекстен Абылай сұлтанның дипломатиялық қызметті анықтау, сонымен қатар XVIII ғасырдың 30–40 жылдарындағы шекаралық аймақтағы Абылай сұлтанның дипломатиялық саясатының дамуын, мазмұнын, сипатын анықтау. *Материалдар мен әдістер.* Зерттеу материалдары ретінде Ресей империясының XVIII ғасырдағы архивтік деректері мен Қазақстан тарихына қатысты құжаттар жинағы қарастырылды. Сондай-ақ, XIX ғ. мен XX ғасырлардағы көрнекті зерттеушілердің еңбектері де пайдаланылды. Ғылыми мақаланы зерттеуде салыстырмалы-тарихи әдіс, диахрондық, хронологиялық, тарихи-типологиялық әдіс, актуализация әдісі, ретроспективті әдіс қолданылды. *Нәтижелер.* Саяси-әкімшілік қызметін Арғын руының шағын Атығай ұлысын билеуден бастаған Абылай сұлтан қазақ-орыс қатынастарының дамуына ерекше мән берді. Қазақ билеушісінің сыртқы саяси қызметінің бұл бағыты жоғары биліктің өкілдеріне, империя әкімшілігінің шенеуніктеріне, сондай-ақ Орынбор және Сібір басшыларына жолданған әртүрлі хабарламалардан тұратын көптеген тарихи деректерде дәлелденген. Абылайдың өз хаттарында,

оның ішінде жеке уәкілдері арқылы көтерген мәселелері адресаттың деңгейіне қарай әр түрлі болды. Сұлтан (хан) Абылайдың Ресеймен қарым-қатынасы құпия кеңесшілер, мемлекеттік қызметшілер, бекініс қолбасшылары, Сібір, Орынбор генерал-губернаторлары және патшайымның өзімен де тікелей байланыс жасау арқылы дипломатиялық байланысы жүзеге асты. *Қорытынды.* Абылай сұлтан орыс-казактары, башқұрттар, орыстардың қазақ жылқыларын ұрлауы мен түрлі бұзақылықтар, бекіністерде заңсыз қамауда ұсталған қазақтар мен орыстардың айырбасы секілді тағы басқа мәселелерді орыс шенеуніктері алдында көтере білді. Ол бекініс коменданттарын қазақ-орыс жорықтарын тоқтатып, жоңғарларға қарсы бірлесе әрекет етуге шақырды. Абылай сауда-саттықтың дамуына, саяси-дипломатиялық байланыстардың нығаюына үлес қосты.

**Алғыс.** Мақала Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігі ШЖҚ РМК Жошы Ұлысын зерттеу ғылыми институтының «Қазақ хандығы XV ғасырдың екінші жартысы – XVIII ғасырдың бірінші жартысы: этносаяси тарих және сыртқы саясат» тақырыбындағы бағдарламалық-мақсатты қаржыландыру жобасын жүзеге асыру аясында орындалды (жеке тіркеу нөмірі: BR 21882223).

**Түйін сөздер:** Абылай сұлтан, сыртқы саясат, дипломатия, шекаралық аймақ, қазақтар, жоңғарлар, Қазақ хандығы, Ресей империясы


**Дәйексөз үшін:** Қуанбай О.Б. Абылай сұлтанның шекаралық аймақтағы дипломатиялық саясаты (XVIII ғасырдың 30–40 жж.) // «Edu.e-history.kz» электрондық ғылыми журналы. 2024. Т. 11. № 1. 124–141 бб. (Ағылш.). DOI: 10.51943/2710-3994\_2024\_11\_1\_124-141

## ДИПЛОМАТИЧЕСКАЯ ПОЛИТИКА СУЛТАНА АБЛАЯ В ПРИГРАНИЧНОЙ ЗОНЕ (30–40-е годы XVIII ВЕКА)

*Олжас Бекенұлы Қуанбай<sup>1\*</sup>*

PhD докторант Анкарского Университета

(Сихие, Алтындаг, 06100 г. Анкара, Турецкая Республика)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2079-1084>. E-mail: [olkube89@gmail.com](mailto:olkube89@gmail.com)

\*Корреспондирующий автор

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**Аннотация.** *Введение.* Султан Аблай как талантливый дипломат в весьма сложных внутривнутриполитических и международных условиях предпринял всевозможные меры и значительные усилия для сохранения суверенитета и территориальной целостности казахского государства. В целях обеспечения личной безопасности и суверенитета государства Аблай султан никогда не был в столице Российской империи. Аблай поддерживал активные дипломатические контакты с центром империи и с его региональными центрами, как Оренбург и Омск, отправляя туда своих близких и родных или же обмениваясь с ними письмами. После завоевания Сибири, когда южные границы Российской империи вплотную приблизились к северным, северо-восточным и восточным рубежам Казахского ханства, дипломатические контакты казахов с российскими властями заметно оживились и осуществлялись в основном через пограничную администрацию Западной Сибири, через г. Тобольск и Омск, а также через крепостных начальников. *Цель и задачи исследования.* Целью настоящего исследования являются выявление дипломатической деятельности из исторического контекста, а также определить развитие, содержание, характер дипломатической политики султана Аблая в приграничной зоне 30–40-е годы XVIII в. *Результаты.* Султан Аблай, начавший свою политическую и

управленческую карьеру с правления небольшим атыгаевским улусом племени аргын, придавал особое значение развитию казахско-российских отношений. Данное направление внешнеполитической деятельности казахского властелина засвидетельствовано в многочисленных исторических источниках, которые составляют различные послания, адресованные представителям высшей власти, чиновникам столичной администрации, а также Оренбургской и Сибирским руководителям. Проблемы, которые поднимал Аблай в своих письмах, в том числе и через своих личных посланников, варьировались в зависимости от уровня адресата. Взаимодействие султана (хана) Аблая с Россией происходило посредством общения с высшим русским чиновничеством как тайными советниками, статскими, командующими крепостями, сибирским, оренбургским генерал-губернаторами и императрицей.

**Заключение.** Султан Аблай поднимал перед российскими чиновниками регионального уровня вопросы, связанные об уgone русскими, башкирами, казаками у казахов значительного количества лошадей, имевшие место различные кражи, вопросы о незаконно задержанных в крепостях казахах и осуществления их обмена на русских подданных, пребывавших у казахов. Он призвал комендантов крепостей остановить казахско-русские взаимные набеги и действовать сообща против джунгар. Аблай также способствовал развитию торговли и укреплению политических и дипломатических связей.

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**Ключевые слова:** Аблай султан, внешняя политика, дипломатия, приграничная зона, казахи, джунгары, Казахское ханство, Российская империя

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## Introduction

Sultan Ablai's diplomatic foreign policy in the border region during the 30–40s of the XVIII century was marked by strategic considerations and diplomatic engagements to safeguard the interests of the Kazakh Khanate. Facing external threats and power struggles in the border areas, Ablai implemented policies aimed at securing the territorial integrity and stability of the Kazakh Khanate. Key aspects of his foreign policy included:

*Diplomatic Engagements:* Sultan Ablai recognized the importance of diplomacy in maintaining peaceful relations with neighboring states. He likely engaged in negotiations and alliances to prevent external aggression and foster stability along the borders.

*Military Alliances:* Ablai sought to establish military alliances with neighboring tribes or khanates to strengthen the collective defense against common enemies. These alliances were crucial in deterring potential invasions and maintaining a balance of power in the region.

*Border Security Measures:* Given the turbulent nature of the border region, Ablai implemented effective border security measures to protect against incursions. This may have included fortifications, surveillance, and military outposts strategically positioned along the borders.

*Trade and Economic Relations:* Ablai recognized the significance of economic ties in fostering stability. Establishing and maintaining trade routes with neighboring regions would not only contribute to economic prosperity but also promote peaceful coexistence through mutual interests.

*Crisis Management:* In times of crisis or conflicts, Sultan Ablai likely employed diplomatic means to de-escalate tensions and find peaceful resolutions. Crisis management would have been crucial



to prevent the outbreak of large-scale conflicts.

*Recognition of Regional Powers:* Ablai may have acknowledged the influence of major regional powers and adapted his foreign policy to accommodate or navigate relationships with these powers, ensuring the Khanate's security within the broader geopolitical context.

*Cultural and Ethnopolitical Considerations:* Considering the diverse ethnic and cultural landscape of the border region, Ablai may have pursued policies that respected the rights and identities of various ethnic groups, contributing to a more harmonious coexistence.

*Legacy of Stability:* A successful foreign policy under Sultan Ablai would have contributed to the legacy of stability in the border region, fostering conditions for economic development, cultural exchange, and the overall well-being of the Kazakh Khanate.

Understanding the intricacies of Sultan Ablai's foreign policy during the specified period requires a detailed examination of historical sources and scholarly works that delve into the specific events and dynamics of that time. This article will examine the foreign diplomatic policy of Sultan Ablai based on reliable archival materials of XVIII century.

### Methods and materials

Methods of historical research such as synchronous, diachronic, chronological, historical-typological method, comparative historical method, retrospective method, updating method were actively used when writing this article.

The topic of the relationship between Khan Ablai and the Russian Empire is supported by a broad range of source materials from various Russian archives, both at the federal and regional levels. Documented evidence regarding Khan Ablai can be found in archives such as the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AFPRE) within the Historical and Documentary Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RSAAA), the Archive of the St. Petersburg Institute of History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, the Russian State Military Historical Archive, the Historical Archive of the Omsk Region (HAOR), and the State Archives of the Orenburg Region (GAOrO). Currently, a substantial portion of these materials has been identified and published. Given Ablai's significant role as a political figure in the 18th-century history of Kazakhstan, information about his state activities has been featured in the initial thematic documentary collections.

### Discussion

To delve into this subject, a comprehensive review of archival documents from the Russian Federation was undertaken: Archive of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AFPRE); Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RSAAA); Historical Archive of the Omsk Region, (HAOR) State Archives of the Orenburg Region (SAOR) the following archives were reviewed AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1740. C. 3. P. 23 rev., 74., AFPRE. F. 122. C. 1. P. 141–143 rev., AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1749. C. 4. P. 206–233 rev., AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1738. C. 3. Pp. 1–2., AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1740. C. 3. P. 76., AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1740. C. 3. P. 77., AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1758 C. 4. P. 33., AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1736. C. 2. Pp. 12–14., AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1740. C. 3. P. 23 rev., AVPRI. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. I. 113/1. 1741. C. 2. Pp. 154–155., AFPRE. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. I. 113/1. 1742. C. 2. Pp. 160–162 rev., AFPRE. F. Kirghiz-Kaysakskie Dela. I. 122/1. 1742 C. 4. Pp. 79 rev.-80., AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1742. C. 2. Pp. 1–4 rev., AFPRE. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. I. 113/1. 1742. C. 4. Pp. 17–19., AFPRE. F. 113. I. 113/1. 1743. C. 3. P. 20 rev., AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1742. C. 4. Pp. 230–237 rev., AFPRE. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. I. 113/1. 1742–1744. C. 3. Pp. 12 rev. – 14 rev., RSAAA. F. 248. Book. 1167. P. 335., RSAAA. F. 248. I. 17. Book. 1167. P. 5 rev., RSAAA. F. 248. I. 17. Book. 1164. P. 573 rev., RSAAA. F. 248. I. 17. Book. 1164. P. 929 rev., RSAAA. F. 248. I. 17. Book. 1167. Pp. 725–728 rev., RSAAA. F. 248. I. 17. Book. 1164. P. 20., IAOO. F. 1. In. 1. C. 16. P. 71–71 rev., 80–80 rev.,

HAOR. F. 1. I. 1. C. 16. P. 75–75 rev., HAOR. F. 1. I. 1. C. 35. Pp. 316–316 rev., HAOR. F. 1. I. 1. C. 35. P. 319 rev., SAOR. F. 3. I. 1. C. 37. Pp. 20–25 rev.

Also, for a thorough comparative study, collections of documents and letters from Kazakh rulers were examined: “Polnoye sobraniye zakonov Rossiyskoy Imperii, 1830 – Polnoye sobraniye zakonov Rossiyskoy Imperii. Sobraniye Pervoye. Tom X. 1737–1739 gg”. 1830., Sbornik dokumentov. “Iz istorii kazakhsko-rossiyskikh otnosheniy. XVIII vek. Sbornik dokumentov” 2019., Yerofeyeva I.V. “Epistolyarnoye naslediyе kazakhskoy pravyyashchey elity 1675–1821 gg. Sbornik istoricheskikh dokumentov. V 2-kh t. T. 1: Pis'ma kazakhskikh praviteley. 1675–1780 gg.

Additionally, I delved into materials from various volumes of “History of the Kazakh SSR,” for instance “Istoriya Kazakhskoy SSR. Istoriya Kazakhskoy SSR. Alma-Ata, 1957., “Istoriya Kazakhskoy SSR s drevneyshikh vremen do nashikh dney v pyati tomakh. T. 3. 1979.

From XVIII and XIX-century researchers, I referred to the works of scholars such as *Andreyev I.G.* “Opisaniye Sredney ordy kirgiz-kaysakov”, *Valikhanov Ch.Ch.* “Sobraniye sochinenii v pyati tomakh. Tom I. 1984., *Valikhanov Ch.Ch.* “Sobraniye sochineniy v pyati tomakh” Tom 4. 1985. From XX-century researchers, I referred to the works of scholars such as *Masevich M.G.* *Materialy po istorii politicheskogo stroya Kazakhstana. Sbornik*” Alma-Ata: AN KazSSR, 1960. T. 1. 1960., *Smirnova N.S.* “Kazakhskiy fol'klor v sobranii G.N. Potanina: arkhivnyye sobraniya i publikatsii”. Alma-Ata: Nauka, 1972., *Suleymenov R.B.* “Iz istorii Kazakhstana XVIII veka (O vneshney i vnutrenney politike Ablaya) // Izbrannyye trudy.” T. 1. *Suleymenov R.B. Moiseyev V.A.* “Iz istorii Kazakhstana XVIII veka (o vneshney i vnutrenney politike Ablaya)”

To research this topic, the works of prominent scientists such as *Yerofeyeva I.V.* “Russko-dzhungarskiye otnosheniya v 40-kh godakh XVIII v. k Kazakhstan (posol'stvo K. Millera) // Iz istorii mezhdunarodnykh otnosheniy v Tsentral'noy Azii”, *Yerofeyeva I.V.* “Istoriya Kazakhstana v russkikh istochnikakh XVI–XX vekov. Pervyye istoriko-etnograficheskiye opisaniya kazakhskikh zemel'. XVIII vek”, *KRO.* “Kazakhsko-russkiye otnosheniya v 16–18 vv. (Sbornik dokumentov i materialov 1961., *Kurbangali, H.* “Tawarix xamsa: (Bes tarix)”, *Nasenov B.* “Abilay han. III taraw, XIII bölim – XVIII kitap. Mäskew arxivteri söyleydi”, *Abuyev K.K.* “Abylay Khan. Sovremenniki i nasledniki: monografiya”

The figure of Ablai Khan, initially subject to diverse evaluations in both domestic and international historiography, along with the era of his rule—a highly intricate and disputatious historical epoch in the destiny of the Kazakh state—has consistently captivated the interest of scholars spanning various generations, beginning from the latter half of the 18th century up to the contemporary era.

## Results

Illustrious leader of the Kazakh people “sultan Ablai (Khan from, 1771), a key figure in the 18th-century Kazakh steppe, implemented a diplomatic strategy of navigating between the major empires of the era — Russia and Qing. He skillfully maintained diplomatic ties with both nations” (KalmSC RAS, 2022: 1204). From the histories of Kazakhstan in Russian sources spanning the 16–20th centuries, we find the following information about Ablai Sultan: “The discerning Sultan and later Khan, Abulmambet, in the 1730s, recognized the potential of his young second cousin, Ablai, as a future prominent state leader. Acknowledging Ablai's capabilities, he appointed the promising young aristocrat and batyr to lead one of the branches of the Atygai group within the Argyn tribe” (Erofeeva, 2007: 168). From the archives of the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RSAAA), there is information of Khan Abulmambet about Ablai Sultan. Over the next several decades, he actively worked to facilitate Ablai's gradual ascent in the Middle and Great Zhuz, addressing him as an equal in power, referring to him as “my brother Ablai-Sultan” (RSAAA. F. 248. Book. 1167. P. 335). It is evident that Abulmambet “extended personal patronage and support to the young Ablai, incorporating him into his inner circle, a factor that undoubtedly influenced his rapid ascent in public

life” (Smirnova, 1972: 283–284).

Drawing on family and folk legends, Ch. Ch. Valikhanov later chronicled the exploits of his great-grandfather Ablai as follows: “Engaging in all raids, initially as a common warrior, he exhibits acts of extraordinary courage and foresight. His valuable counsel and strategic insights solidify his reputation as a wise leader” (Valikhanov, 1985: 112). Gaining respect among the aristocrats is crucial for any leader, particularly considering that not everyone manages to attain the renown of a hero: “During this time, Ablai distinguished himself prominently among the array of young Kazakh sultans, earning the esteemed title of “bahadur” from the Kazakhs in recognition of his bravery and military accomplishments” (Suleimenov, 1988: 25). The historical details regarding political weight and governance of Ablai are substantiated by archival records: “Ablai governed numerous tribal groups of the Middle Zhuz, primarily traversing the northern and northeastern regions” (AFPRES. F. 122. I. 1740. C. 3. P. 23 rev., P. 74).

In the early 1730s, “he led specific patronymic groups within the modest Atygay of the Argyn tribe, boasting a following of 1,000 males by 1731” (AFPRES. F. 122. C. 1. Pp. 141–143 rev.). However, in the 1730s and 1740s, the wise and determined Sultan steadily expanded his influence and leadership in the extensive Middle Zhuz, “with approximately 10,500 families coming under his guidance by 1736” (RSAAA. F. 248. I. 17. C. 1164. C. 1. P. 20). By 1740, “his influence extended to around 20,000 families, encompassing Atygai tribes and, to some extent, the Karakeseks (Argyns) tribe. In 1749, his administration further expanded to include all seven tribes of the Argyn, along with the Kerey, Uak, and a portion of the Kipchak” (AFPRES. F. 122. I. 1749. C. 4. P. 206–233 rev.).

Ablai Sultan initiated his initial diplomatic correspondences with Orenburg officials: “In 1736, Ablai, in collaboration with Abulmambet, initiated diplomatic ties with Orenburg authorities, engaging in written correspondence to address trade-related matters” (AFPRES. F. 122. I. 1738. C. 3. Pp. 1–2). And contributed to the development of bilateral relations with Russia (Erofeeva, 2014: 274). Ablai did not personally participate in the oath-taking ceremony. However, Soviet ideology portrays it as if he officially swore allegiance to the Tsar through documented means: “In 1740, within the walls of the Orsk fortress, he, along with Khan Abulmambet of the Middle Zhuz, solemnly “formally pledged” allegiance as citizens” (Masevich, 1960: 38).

The support of Sultan Sultanmamet had its own special meaning in Ablai's diplomatic ties with the Russian Empire. Khan Ablai (1711–1780) and Sultan Sultanmamet (1710–1794) cultivated a warm and trusting relationship, leading the Irtysh Kazakhs and the Kipchak volost. This strong bond can be attributed to various factors. Firstly, they were close relatives as cousins. Secondly, being of the same age and sharing common principles, they consistently backed each other in both foreign policy matters and internal affairs. Thirdly, their joint military alliance saw them through numerous campaigns against the Dzungars, Volga Kalmyks, and Kyrgyz, enduring hardships together. They sought each other's counsel in the most challenging life situations and supported one another through the twists of fate. Lastly, they spent their childhood together in the southern region of the Kazakh Khanate” (Istoriya Kazakhskoy SSR, 1957: 261).

They assumed leadership roles around the same time, and their bond strengthened in the early stages of their appointments as rulers of specific uluses. As the Sultan of the Kipchak ulus in the Irtysh region, Sultan Sultanmamet sought assistance from I. Neplyuev, the head of the Orenburg Commission, on August 27, 1742. He visited the Orsk fortress to seek help in freeing Sultan Ablai from Dzungarian captivity, and this meeting took place on August 28 in Orsk” (KRO v VI–XVIII vv., 1961: 242–243).

The young Sultan Ablai, who embarked on his political and administrative journey by overseeing the modest Atygai ulus of the Argyn tribe, placed significant emphasis on fostering Kazakh-Russian relations. This facet of the Kazakh ruler's foreign policy endeavors is evident in a plethora of historical sources, comprising diverse missives directed towards high-ranking officials, the capital administration, as well as leaders in Orenburg and Siberia: “In 1736, the twenty-five-year-old Sultan Ablai,



along with his supporter Abulmambet, initiated diplomatic engagements with Orenburg officials. They commenced exchanging brief written communications to foster the development of bilateral relations.” (AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1736. C. 2. Pp. 12–14).

Even though Abulmambet legally occupied the khan's throne, the content of their oath did not differ significantly from the previous promises made during oath ceremonies by their contemporaries (AFPRE. F. 122. 1740. C. 3. P. 76). In the archives, we can observe Ablai's foresight and skillful approach to state affairs: “Sultan Ablai also encouraged V.N. Tatishchev boldly and selflessly, urging him not to spare his life if necessary” (AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1740. C. 3. P. 77). By taking this political maneuver, Ablai clearly aimed, firstly, to secure the external security of the tribes under his control from the raids of the Bashkirs and Siberian Cossacks in the north and northeast of the region through the patronage of the Russian authorities. Secondly, he sought the right to roam unhindered on the right bank of the Irtysh, establishing regular trade between Kazakhs and Russian merchants on the Siberian border lines. Thirdly, he aimed to strengthen the structures of khan power in the Middle Zhuz and expand their sphere of influence in the southern regions of Central Asia adjacent to the Kazakh nomads.

However, having gained experience in political struggle and developed strategic thinking, the Sultan placed his hopes on the Qing Empire. Tevkelev noted that “this Ablai-Sultan, as can be seen from his deeds, has already established some familiarity with the Chinese” (AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1758. C. 4. P. 33). The territories of the Middle Zhuz held a crucial role in the political dynamics between the Kazakh Khanate and the Qing Empire. Ablai “supported internal conflicts within the Dzungar territories, gradually displacing the Oirats from the lands of Kazakhstan as a result of their internal strife. This tactical approach not only weakened the Dzungars but also significantly fortified Ablai's political standing among the nomadic communities in the region under his influence” (Valikhanov, 1984: 258–272).

In the scientific work “Tawarikh Khamsa” there is historical information that “by the mid-1750s, “Ablai's sway extended over nearly all the tribes and clans of the Middle Zhuz, a success largely propelled by his triumphant military campaigns against the Oirats” (Kurbangali, 1992: 105–106). It's no coincidence “that several Kazakh folk legends recounting the military feats of Ablai and his warriors on the battlefield trace back to this period in the future senior khan's historical biography” (Smirnova, 1972: 281–283).

To delve into the study's subject, it's essential to examine Ablai's interactions with the central imperial government more closely: “Ablai, much like numerous other Kazakh khans, never ventured to the capital of the Russian Empire. This seems to have been a deliberate choice on his part to ensure personal safety. Simultaneously, he actively engaged in diplomatic communications with the imperial center and its regional hubs, such as Orenburg and Omsk, either dispatching his envoys or exchanging letters. Following the Siberian conquest, as the southern borders of the Russian Empire approached the northern, northeastern, and eastern borders of the Kazakh Khanate, diplomatic ties between the Kazakhs and Russian authorities experienced a noticeable revival. These interactions were predominantly conducted through the border administration of Western Siberia, the cities of Tobolsk and Omsk, as well as through local leaders” (AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1736. C. 2. P. 12–14).

Sultan Ablai consistently addressed regional Russian officials on various issues, such as the large-scale theft of Kazakh horses by Russians, Bashkirs, and Cossacks. He raised concerns about numerous theft incidents, inquired about Kazakhs unlawfully held in fortresses, and advocated for their exchange with Russian subjects residing among the Kazakhs. Ablai frequently pressed fortress commandants to halt mutual raids between Kazakhs and Russian subjects, urged collaborative efforts against the Dzungars, and sought to establish trade relations.

It is fair to acknowledge that, historically, the Kazakhs of the Middle zhuz engaged in direct negotiations with the Russian side, primarily with Tobolsk, the center of the Siberian province, rather than Orenburg, which was established much later: “These communications primarily focused on issues related to the creation of a military alliance against the pressing threat from the Dzungars. Additionally, they addressed matters of mutual trade and problem resolution arising from reciprocal raids. The subjects raised in Ablai's letters, conveyed through personal envoys, varied depending on the recipient's rank. Accessible archival sources indicate that Sultan (Khan) Ablai communicated with the highest Russian officials of the 1st-5th class, including privy councilors, civil servants, fortress commanders, and Siberian/Orenburg governors-general. This diplomatic interaction extended even to empresses. One of the earliest letters, personally written by Sultan Ablai, dates back to August 28, 1740, and was addressed to Empress Anna Ioannovna” (Erofeeva, 2014: 280).

Ablai initiated contact with the highest authorities of the empire in the early XVIII century. Thus, Sultan Ablai of the Middle zhuz had a vital interest in resolving issues related to mutual raids. In a joint address with Abulmambet to the empress dated December 12, 1737, a diplomatic gesture is evident, revealing the sultans' desire to secure her support: “A countless army is commandingly used against the enemy, from the east to the west, to large and small nations and many cities, the ruler... like the depth of the ocean, the power that is expansive, like a payment wisely understood, to the imperial majesty, our father, we Abulmamet-sultan and Ablai-sultan, we bow deeply...” (RSAAA. F. 248. I. 17. C. 1167. P. 5 rev.).

Similarly, in the letters of 1737 to the head of the Orenburg Commission, Privy Councilor V.N. Tatishchev, where the name “Ablai-Bahadur-Sultan” appeared, who reported on the fulfillment of the instructions of the Russian Empire to ruin the Bashkirs, a significant part of the correspondence dealt with issues related to ensuring the safety of the movement of trade caravans in the steppe: “From distant places, close to the heart of the All-Russian ruler, his friends bow their heads and extend greetings to His Majesty. We have safely returned the merchants who arrived here, and our merchants will also journey, following the orders of the White Tsar. We have executed the command to destroy the Bashkirs as directed by His Majesty, and now we await further instructions. If it is the will of Their Majesties to send our envoys on a journey, we submit to their command. This letter is written by Abulmamet Khan and Ablai Bagatur Sultan, and it is addressed to the Orenburg commander” (RSAAA. F. 248. I. 17. C. 1164. P. 573 rev.).

In 1737, Ablai expressed his readiness to swear allegiance to Colonel A.I. Tevkelev in a letter, stating, “I am prepared to serve Her Imperial Majesty in any capacity.” (RSAAA. F. 248. I. 17. C. 1164. P. 929 rev.). Throughout 1738, leaders of the Middle Zhuz, including Ablai, corresponded with Empress Anna Ioannovna, “deliberating on the location for taking the oath, due to the departure of the Kazakhs to significant distances in the steppe” (RSAAA. F. 248. I.17. C. 1167. Pp. 725–728 rev.).

Privy Councilor V.N. Tatishchev swiftly conveyed the situation in the Orenburg region to Empress Anna Ioannovna of the Russian Empire on May 28, 1739, highlighting the willingness of the influential Chingizids of the Middle Zhuz to embrace what was referred to as Russian citizenship: “Barak Sultan, along with Abdul Mamed and Ablai Sultan, are members of our Middle Horde, expressing their desire to affirm this through an oath and provide trustworthy hostages (amanates)” (Polnoye sobraniye zakonov Rossiyskoy Imperii, 1830: 871).

In response, Empress Anna Ioannovna issued significant instructions emphasizing the urgent review of letters of request from Ablai Sultan and other renowned Kazakh leaders of the steppe. This is evident in the personal decree No. 7876, directed to Lieutenant General Prince V.A. Urusov on August 20, 1739: “Respond to them with optimism and the utmost grace of Our Imperial Majesty. Simultaneously, dispatch a modest allowance in cloth, damask, and other readily available items in Samara. The quantity and variety of goods to be sent to each person are left to your discretion” (Polnoye sobraniye zakonov Rossiyskoy Imperii, 1830: 871).

As it is well-known, the tradition of the Russian side presenting gifts and diverse offerings to Kazakh leaders has become an essential and ingrained aspect of the Russian diplomatic and colonial strategy. Evidently, this was done with the intention of pacifying the sultans, khans, and warriors. Concurrently, regional authorities were granted considerable autonomy and broad powers to deal with Sultan Ablai, contingent on the prevailing circumstances. The early 1740s mark a period of increased efforts by the Russian government to consolidate its influence in the Kazakh steppe. A closer examination of subsequent events reveals a certain alignment of these plans with the interests of the Kazakh ruling elite. They harbored hopes that, with the support of the Russian armed forces, they could address the Dzungarian issue and manage challenges arising from the restless Bashkirs. It is noteworthy that negotiations between the Kazakhs and the Russian side in Orenburg in 1740 and 1742 played a constructive role in strengthening Kazakh-Russian ties: “In late 1739, Sultan Ablai penned a letter to the leader of the Orenburg expedition (commission), V.A. Urusov, requesting him to present and bear witness to it before Anna Ioannovna” (AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1740. C. 3. P. 23 rev.).

Subsequently, the Sultan conveyed his eagerness to collaborate with Russia and urgently petitioned to be received, along with his fellow Kazakhs, under the protection of the Russian Empire. Evidently, during this period, a series of informal allegiances emerged among the Kazakhs, entailing certain material or financial advantages and privileges. It is clear that by making this informal pledge, Ablai pursued personal objectives, aiming to secure maximum benefits and advantages for himself. This included facilitating trade with Russians, crossing to the inner side of the border line around the “Staroishim” and “Irtysh” fortifications, putting an end to mutual raids, and securing the return of escaped captives, slaves, and cattle taken during military conflicts, among other considerations. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that swearing allegiance also held the promise of putting an end to the raids by Russian citizens, particularly the Bashkirs and the still-pressing Dzungars at that time. Nonetheless, subsequent events revealed that not only were these goals not achieved, but also incidents unfolded that significantly strained relations between the Kazakhs and Sultan Ablai with these restive nations.

Thus, as Governor-General Urusov reported to St. Petersburg in the spring of 1741, the Dzungarian army carried out several raids on the Kazakhs, who became subjects of the Russians, as a result of which they were defeated in a number of battles. Sultan of the Middle zhuz Ablai, along with two hundred people, was captured by the Dzungars. In this regard, the commander of the Orenburg Commission, Urusov, sent a report to the College of Foreign Affairs on May 13, 1741 about the Russian citizenship of the Kazakhs: “...in instances where the Dzungars launch destructive attacks on the subjects of His Imperial Majesty, the Kirghiz-Kaisaks (Kazakhs), it is imperative to address the situation so that the Kirghiz-Kaysaks (Kazakhs) are not held accountable for any harm inflicted by the Dzungars. It is essential to recognize that these subjects of His Imperial Majesty cannot be left without support. Furthermore, the Siberian Provincial Chancellery has shown a favorable inclination towards assisting such individuals in seeking appropriate measures in response” (AFPRE. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. I. 113/1. I. 1741. C. 2. Pp. 154–155).

In the autumn of 1740, a fresh incursion by Dzungar forces into the Kazakh steppes unfolded, and Ablai played a pivotal role in resisting the enemy's onslaught. V.A. Urusov reminded Siberian Governor P. I. Buturlin of Ablai Sultan's pledge of allegiance to the empire, emphasizing that the Kazakhs, as loyal Russian subjects, would be hard-pressed to withstand the Dzungar assault in Siberia without support. Furthermore, the government expressed concern about the message from Dzungar Khan Galdan Tseren to the Russian Empress on March 31, 1742. He demanded the demolition of fortresses in the Upper Irtysh region, the surrender of Dzungar subjects in Siberia, and “non-interference with the Oirats collecting tribute from the Altai Mountains. The message expressed hope for a mutual return of people, anticipating that upon the return of those held captive, their demands would be met. Trusting in the Empress's decree, Galdan Tseren pledged not only to fulfill the decree's demands but also to include those taken captive and those who had escaped to them with their families, children, slaves



acquired while with them, and all their possessions, even if unwanted, and some who were subject to their laws willingly gave everything away” (AFPRE. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. I. 113/1. 1742. C. 2. Pp. 160–162 rev.).

Dzungaria hesitated to engage in simultaneous warfare on two fronts – against both Russia and the Kazakh zhuzes. The looming threat from the east, posed by the Qing Empire, awaited a favorable moment to absorb Oirat lands. Galdan Tseren's cautious stance towards the expanding Russian presence on the southeastern borders could be partially explained by this complex geopolitical situation: “On April 14, 1742, Galdan Tseren sent an envoy to Abulkhair, demanding that his sons be sent as hostages (amanats), and a tax in the form of fox fur or other fur-bearing animals. The punishment for failure to comply with these demands was to send Dzungar troops for a new attack” (AFPRE. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. I. 122/1. I. 1742. C. 4. P. 79 rev.–80).

Khan Abulkhair, in a letter dated June 18, 1742, informed Governor-General I.I. Neplyuev of Orenburg about the demands from the Dzungar Khan. Recently revealed historical materials provide insight into how such interactions with the Kazakhs influenced Russian-Dzungar relations. The Dzungars “attempted to foster discord among the Kazakh tribes, urging them to align temporarily against Russian defensive positions. In September 1742, the Russians insisted that the Dzungars cease military actions against Russian Imperial's Kazakh subjects. In a letter to Neplyuev, Noyon Sary-Manja pointed out that certain Kazakh batyrs and sultans had attacked Russian border fortifications, leading to distrust among the Oirats regarding the status of the Kazakhs as Russian subjects. He expressed concern and discord, emphasizing, “These Kazakhs are not yours; you call them strangers” (Erofeeva, 1990: 51–53).

The exchange of letters between the head of the Orenburg Commission, I.I. Neplyuev, and Galdan Tseren “from September 2, 1742, to February 1, 1743, not only revealed Russia's firm stance in declaring the Kazakhs as “loyal subjects” of the Russian Empire” (AFPRE. F. 122. 1742. C. 2. Pp. 1–4 rev). In response, Sary-Manja emphasized that despite Russia's demand for the release of prisoners of war like Ablai, who were considered subjects of the empress, the friendly relations between the Russians and the Dzungars made it impossible for the Kazakhs to be true subjects of the Russian Empire since they posed a threat to the borders of the Dzungars (AFPRE. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. In. 113/1. I. 1742. C. 4. Pp. 17–19).

In a letter from the Dzungarian noyon Sary-Mandzhi to the head of the Orenburg Commission Neplyuev regarding the citizenship of the Kazakhs of the Middle and Junior Zhuzes, the following was stated: “You communicated through Major Miller and his companions that the Middle and Lesser Hordes of Kazakhs, belonging to your great empress, became subjects and jurors. You hope that our great khan Galdan-Cheren is unaware of this. Consequently, our Zengor army plundered the Middle and Little Kazakh hordes, and afterward, sent envoys demanding amanat and tribute. Moreover, you assume that by declaring the Lower Kasakis as subjects of your great empress, you convey this to his lordship Galdan-Cheren, and release the previously captured Ablai-Saltan and other Kazakh captives. Since these Middle and Little Hordes of Kazakhs are not subjects of your Russia, and if they were, a friendly union and good peace between both states, these subjects of Kazakhs, as you call them, caused concern and fervor in our border uluses. Thus, attributing the violation of friendship between the two great khans to your own permission” (AFPRE. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. I. 113/1. 1742. C. 4. Pp. 17–19).

In 1742, a diplomatic mission was dispatched to Dzungaria from the Orsk fortress, led by Russian Army Major Karl Miller, “in response to Dzungaria's military actions against the Middle Zhuz. Major K. Miller in 1742–1743 played a certain role in securing the release of Sultan Ablai from captivity” (AFPRE. F. 113. I. 113/1. 1743. C. 3. P. 20 rev.). This marked one of the initial tangible actions by the Russian administration to recognize Kazakh representatives as subjects. Anticipating potential Kazakh incursions into Dzungar border regions, the Russian administration insisted that the Hun-Taiji treat such incidents as matters involving Russia, thereby urging resolution through communication with St. Petersburg without engaging with Kazakh rulers on this matter. Miller was tasked with making

every effort to liberate Sultan Ablai and his entourage from Dzungar captivity: “The instructions from the Orenburg Commission to Major Miller of the Penza Garrison Infantry Regiment outlined the goal of reaching an agreement with Galdan Tseren to address current issues through negotiations, and to facilitate the exchange of embassies for resolving crucial matters. In case of unexpected situations, Miller was to use “sound judgment,” ensuring that every action served the highest interests and the benefit of all, as it was impossible to prescribe every detail from afar” (AFPRE. F. 122. I. 1742. C. 4. Pp. 230–237 rev.).

Ablai was ultimately freed by the Dzungars rather than the Russians. Soviet-era studies tend to attribute this result to the efforts of the Miller mission for providing protection from external danger. There is also frequent mention of Ablai's frustration with the perceived inaction of Abulmambet and his son Sultan Abulfeis. They failed to engage in direct negotiations with the Oirat Khan to secure Ablai's release from captivity or to improve his living conditions while in Dzungaria. However, documents and letters revealed that this statement was not entirely objective and even displayed signs of a negative impact on Kazakh-Russian relations. According to Governor I.I. Neplyuev's report to the Collegium of Foreign Affairs on the outcomes of K. Miller's embassy to Dzungaria and the circumstances of Ablai's release, the following was reported: “Miller, upon reaching the Kazakhs, learned that upon his departure, his Cossack captives, Ablai-sultan, and those who were with him, were released and returned with their son sent from Abulmambet Khan. The Privy Councilor believes that Galdan-Chirin, in order to demonstrate the moderation and privilege with which he wishes to support the Kazakhs under his patronage, will be able to influence these people through his policy rather than sending troops...” (AFPRE. F. Zyungorskiye Dela. I. 113/1. 1742–1744. C. 3. P. 12 rev.).

Ablai staunchly defended his subjects against the misconduct of military personnel along the Irtysh and Novoishimsk lines of military fortifications, outposts, and redoubts. It was inevitable during the 1740s–1770s that the Russian Empire, through regional authorities, primarily negotiated with Ablai and his ally and supporter, Sultanmambet Sultan, in the Middle Irtysh region. This approach was compelled by the tsarist government, as any incidents of “insolence,” horse theft, or the abduction of Russians by Kazakhs required centralized resolution through influential and authoritative figures like khans and sultans. Later, with the widespread acceptance of “citizenship” by certain Kazakh groups, a period ensued where negotiations bypassed Ablai and other sultans, engaging directly with his subordinate Kazakh commoners such as elders, batyrs, and biys. Consequently, the authority of Senior Khan Ablai was gradually undermined. However, during the 1740s–1750s in Northern, North-Eastern, and Eastern Kazakhstan, negotiations predominantly continued through Sultan Ablai, along with other influential sultans like Sultanmambet and Abulfeis.

In any event, Ablai played a central role as the primary defender of the Kazakhs from the Middle and Senior zhuzes against the actions of military personnel. Kazakhs faced various challenges from the Russians, including the forceful displacement of people and confiscation of livestock. Serf commanders unlawfully detained Kazakhs in border fortresses, and captives and slaves from the steppe often fled to the border, causing concern among Ablai's subjects. In such circumstances, the affected Kazakhs sought assistance from the influential Ablai, who not only participated as one party in negotiations but also served as the main mediator in the border zone: “But as the leaders of this horde, Abulmambet Khan and Ablai Sultan, who are cousins, along with their respected elders and a large group of people, arrived in Orenburg on August 24, 1739” (Andreev, 2006: 44–45).

There is other historical information on this matter: “After 1740, Abulkhair Khan severed ties with the Governor-General of Orenburg because his son was not released from custody. Even the local sultans did not recognize him. The khanate lost its leadership. This could be attributed to the fact that since 1731, the control was handed over to the Russian Governor-General without considering Abulkhair Khan. They initiated construction of forts without proper authorization. On the other hand, Ablai, though

a sultan and not a khan at first, assumed the position of a khan from 1743 to 1771. Despite requests from politicians like Ombi and the Orenburg Governor-General Gusev, he refrained from direct involvement, maintaining a certain distance from the Russians. Throughout Ablai's rule, not a single Russian soldier set foot on Kazakh land without permission” (Nasenov, 2011: 74).

Sultan Ablai's diplomatic efforts, as evident in all his letters, left a mark on the border regions. For instance, on June 17, 1748, a report was submitted by the chief commandant of the Irtysh line, Pavlutsky, to the commander of the troops on the Siberian border lines, Major General Kinderman. The report detailed three letters received from Ablai Sultan, wherein he requested the return of the people of the renowned Atygaev batyr Alimbet, who had been previously abducted by Russian military personnel: “Simultaneously, I inform you that the content of these letters relates to Alembet-batyr's intention to exchange Russian captives for their own prisoners” (HAOR. F. 1. I. 1. C. 16. Pp. 71–71 rev., 80–80 rev.).

Certainly, in his letter dated June 15, 1748, Sultan Ablai expressed the necessity of repatriating Alimbet Batyr's family and followers held in Russia: “Additionally, I request your attention to the situation: forty-eight individuals were captured by Batyr Almetya. Among them, eleven lost their lives, twenty-four livestock were driven away, and thirteen yurts were pillaged. Moreover, one thousand two hundred horses were taken, of which four hundred were returned, leaving the rest in your possession. In response to numerous appeals, we kindly request the return of our people, livestock, and horses” (IAOO. F.1. I. 1. C. 16. Pp. 75–75 rev.). As evident from the Sultan's communication, 48 individuals from the batyr's group were abducted, resulting in the unfortunate demise of 11. Additionally, 1,200 horses owned by the batyr were seized, with only 400 eventually being returned. The Sultan also mentions that for the past six years, this issue has yet to find a satisfactory resolution: “For the past six years, our efforts have not yielded a resolution” (HAOR. F. 1. I. 1. C. 16. P. 75 rev.).

Following this, he provides a detailed list of the names of the relatives and close associates of the batyr Alimbet, who were taken captive by the Russians. Impressively, he exhibits his thorough knowledge of the captives: “Alimbet-batyr's primary wife, Salutsa, and his secondary wife, Kurmash, both from the Kalmyk family, along with his third wife, Shyrin. Alimbet's daughter, Baybike, remains with the governor in Tomsk. Salutsa and Kurmash are under the care of Alexei Mikhailovich Sukharev. Shyrin fled from Tomsk to Kalmyk land but was later returned to Alimbet-batyr. Gilgildeev's son, Kiinbai, is in Tara with Semyon Mozhevitin. The captured people, including Alimbet-batyr himself, need to be sent away. Their names are Alat, with a daughter named Katabika, another daughter named Batugus, a son named Utyash, another son named Kalnakchi, and a third son named Telyamysh. Gilgildeeva's wife is Mairem Ubuklubaeva, and her son is Isen. Tugun Umerchekova's wife is Asau. I provide this information to you, so that you can arrange for the release of these people. Please inform me whether these individuals exist, and if so, share the news with me” (HAOR. F. 1. I. 1. C. 16. Pp. 75–75 rev.). As evident, all three wives of the batyr were abducted. The Sultan was well-informed about the locations of the batyr's wives and their children.

Sultan Ablai struggled to unite the Kazakhs on the right bank of the Irtysh during the 1750–1770s, employing both diplomatic and military means. As is well-known, a prominent and pressing issue in the XVIII century for Kazakh nomadic society was the scarcity of fertile pastures on the steppe. This matter, typically addressed by respected Kazakh khans and influential sultans, became increasingly significant: “By the mid-XVIII century, as the Irtysh line of military fortifications solidified, the majority of steppe residents faced restrictions on crossing to the right bank of the Irtysh (*Kaz. Ertis – O.K.*). The Russian Empire adhered to a relatively stringent policy, confining the Kazakh population within or beyond the ten-verst line on its left bank” (Kasymbaev, 1997: 12–13).

With the waning of the Dzungar threat, Kazakh leaders actively sought to expand onto the right bank of the Irtysh, traditionally considered ancient nomadic lands: “However, they encountered staunch opposition from the Tsarist authorities, who managed to assert control over this extensive region



within a span of 20–30 years. The notion that the border fortresses were ostensibly constructed for the benefit of the Kazakhs to shield them from pressing enemies does not withstand scrutiny. In our view, the primary purpose of the Irtysh fortresses was to serve as a launching pad for acquiring both the lands once taken by the Dzungars from the Kazakhs on the right bank of the Irtysh and the lands inhabited by the Kazakhs on its left bank. The restrictions began with the directive of General Springer, the commander of the Siberian lines, in 1765. Furthermore, the presence of fortresses along the Irtysh did not shield the Kazakhs from the Dzungarian genocide, both in 1723 and subsequent years (such as in 1741), irrespective of whether the Kazakhs were Russian citizens or not” (Istoriya Kazakhskoy SSR. 1979: 14, 64).

For instance, on December 14, 1754, Colonel Dehong, the commander of the Yamyshev fortress, reported to Brigadier Kraft, the commander of the Siberian line’s troops, that he had received a letter from Ablai Sultanmamet Sultan’s cousin urgently requesting permission to cross to the right bank of the Irtysh (*Kaz. Ertis – O.K.*). However, he declined this request, highlighting the stringent policy aimed at preventing Kazakhs from accessing the right bank of the Irtysh (*Kaz. Ertis – O.K.*). In his report, Colonel Dehong stated: “On November 29th of last year, two individuals arrived with a letter from the Kirghiz-Kaysak (Kazakh) foreman Sultanmamet... Those sent by him, the elders of the Kirghiz (Kazakh) people, asked for permission to bring their herds to the local Russian side. I firmly conveyed that under no circumstances should they bring their herds to this side, and it is impossible to grant such permission as per the decrees” (HAOR. F. 1. I. 1. C. 35. Pp. 316–316 rev.).

Interestingly, Sultanmamet, who has held Russian citizenship for over a decade, is seeking permission for livestock migration. The Russian regional authorities, including fortress commanders, were well aware of the dual challenges faced by the Kazakhs – not only the threat of insufficient pastures but also the ongoing aggression from the formidable Dzungars. However, rather than supporting the Kazakhs, the Tsarist government, following the principle of weakening the Kazakhs by reducing their livestock, decides to collaborate with the Dzungars to make the Kazakhs more dependent and vulnerable.

On December 31, 1754, in coordination with Sultan Ablai Sultanmamet sultan once again dispatched a letter addressed to Kraft, appealing for permission to migrate his herds to the right bank of the river. He presented what he believed were compelling arguments in favor of his request: “We are all humble servants of the benevolent Empress, and we confess our sins. We have no other intentions; our people engage in trade with yours. We only seek pasture for our horses. I kindly request your support in securing provisions for our horses!” (HAOR. F. 1. I. 1. C. 35. Pp. 316–319 rev.).

However, the regional authorities, both on the Orenburg line, responded with a resolute rejection, citing the latest decrees from the highest echelons of the empire. For instance, on January 31, 1755, a recent decree from Empress Elizaveta Petrovna reached the Orenburg governor I.I. Neplyuev, crafted within the Military Collegium, specifically addressing “Preventing the Kirghiz-Kaisaks (Kazakhs) from the right bank” of the Irtysh River: “At the same time, the commanders stationed at the outposts must emphatically reinforce the directive that the aforementioned Kirghis-Kaisaks (Kazakhs) are not permitted to approach the outposts. To prevent any harm to our people by them, they should exercise utmost vigilance and maintain rigorous and unceasing precautions, as stipulated by military regulations and decrees” (SAOR. F. 3. I. 1. C. 37. Pp. 20–25 rev.).

Ablai diplomatically pursued a policy of fostering good neighborly relations along the Kazakh-Russian border. Ablai almost never initiated or participated in military clashes with Russia on the border. Therefore, for almost 50 years of living next to the Russians, he managed to ensure peace on the border, not allowing Russians onto Kazakh soil. He also managed to carry out mutually beneficial trade on the border. In the same way, he managed to preserve the territorial integrity of the Kazakh land. Ablai made significant efforts to curb Kazakh raids into Russian territory.

Ablai did his best to suppress Kazakh raids on the Russian side: “Hence, as per the account of Cossack I. Etsygaev, who returned from Ablai in 1744, it was conveyed that Sultan Ablai, the ruler

of the Middle zhuz, dispatched messengers to all his uluses. Their mission was to communicate his decree to all subjects, instructing them to cease raiding the Russian side. This decision was prompted by an assault led by foreman Kudaiberdy's armed detachment on Russian settlements along the Ishim River, resulting in the capture of 20 individuals and the theft of 80 horses. One of the motivations behind this attack was Kudaiberdy's quest for retribution for perceived affronts from the Omsk fortress military team. In a bid to prevent further escalation and diffuse the conflict, Ablai sent Sultan Zholbarys to Tobolsk. His mission was to deliver a letter and verbally assure that Ablai and his subjects were committed to maintaining peaceful and friendly relations with Russia" (Abuov, 2013: 144). It is also known that Ablai sent a similar strict order not to attack the Russian side throughout all his possessions around the end of the 1750s: "...so that the Kaysaks (Kazakhs) and Russia would be peaceful and would not have any quarrels or steal..." (Suleimenov, 2015: 92).

Ablai consistently highlighted in his communications with Russian border authorities that Kazakh property, including horses, confiscated on the Russian side, needed to be returned. This issue stirred dissatisfaction among many of his subjects. The discontent often manifested in the form of Kazakhs forming armed groups and contemplating attacks on Russian border villages. Yet, Ablai consistently worked to avert conflicts and sought diplomatic resolutions in such instances: "On June 15, 1748, Ablai addressed Colonel Pavlutsky, the commander of the Siberian Dragoon Garrison Regiment, regarding the repatriation of the wives and daughter of his close ally, Alimbet Batyr of the Atygai clan. They were held in Tobolsk and Tomsk as noble hostages, along with 48 others from Batyr's group, who were captured by the Russians during a military raid in 1743. Additionally, 1,200 horses were taken. Alimbet Batyr, contemplating an armed retaliation against the Russian border, was dissuaded by Ablai, who assured him that the matter would be resolved through negotiations with Siberian border authorities" (Sbornik dokumentov XVIII vek, 2019: 20–23, 30).

Even in the 18th century, Sultan Ablai adeptly employed the policy of "checks and balances" in international politics, to curb the encroachment of both powers on the Kazakh steppe: "Starting in 1757, he adeptly forged diplomatic connections with the Qing Empire. Sustaining these contacts consistently helped impede the encroachment of the Russian Empire into the Kazakh Khanate's territory and averted a potential intensification of military conflicts with Qing China, as witnessed during 1756–1757" (KalmSC RAS, 2022: 1204).

Ablai recognized that the incursions of the steppe dwellers into Russian territory disrupts the harmonious relations between the two states. The Kazakhs relied on the interior for grazing their livestock, purchasing grain from border fortresses, and engaging in barter trade (satovka). Specifically, raids conducted for the purpose of plunder, as opposed to the traditional Kazakh practice of "barymta," considered a legitimate act for restoring justice and compensating for material damage, posed a threat to the amicable coexistence of neighbors. It is noteworthy that in the years 1760–1761, Ablai successfully deterred Yeraly, the formidable and influential Sultan of the Little zhuz, from launching attacks on the Russian borderlands. Yeraly, known for his martial and assertive nature, often acted independently in dealings with Russia, despite having sworn allegiance" (Suleimenov, 2015: 92).

Sultan Ablai also recognized the economic dimension of diplomacy in the border region. Actively contributing to the development of trade, he endeavored to create an interconnected economic network that transcended political boundaries. By strengthening trade routes and promoting commerce, he aimed to weave an intricate fabric of economic interdependence that would serve as a stabilizing force in the region. Furthermore, Sultan Ablai's diplomatic policy involved strengthening political ties with neighboring entities. By fostering alliances and cooperation, he aimed to create a united front against potential external threats. Ablai understood the importance of solidarity in maintaining the sovereignty of his realm and safeguarding the interests of his people.

## Conclusion

Ablai sultan staunchly defended his people against the abuses of military personnel in the fortresses, outposts, and redoubts along the Irtysh and Novoishimsk lines. This was inevitable in the 1740s–1770s, as the Russian Empire, represented by regional authorities in northern, northeastern, and eastern Kazakhstan, primarily engaged in negotiations through Ablai. Alongside him, other influential leaders, such as his ally Sultan Sultanmamet and Abulfeis in the Middle Irtysh region, played a crucial role. This approach was compelled by the tsarist government, as any incidents of "insolence," horse theft, or crimes against Russians by Kazakhs required resolution through centralized figures – namely, khans and sultans.

During the tumultuous years of the 1730s to 1740s, Sultan Ablai navigated the intricate web of diplomatic challenges in the border areas under his jurisdiction with a shrewd and forward-thinking policy. Recognizing the significance of maintaining equilibrium in a region marked by diverse geopolitical interests, Ablai employed a nuanced diplomatic approach.

Sultan Ablai strategically sought to establish peaceful coexistence through diplomatic channels, understanding the repercussions of conflicts on the well-being of his people. He engaged in dialogue with the commanders of neighboring fortresses, urging collaboration to curb mutual raids between the Kazakhs and Russians. This collaborative stance not only aimed to ensure regional stability but also to foster amicable relations that transcended traditional ethnic and national boundaries. In dealing with the Dzungars, Ablai pursued a diplomatic strategy grounded in pragmatic negotiations. Aware of the potential for border tensions, he sought common ground and diplomatic solutions to mitigate hostilities. Ablai's emphasis on dialogue and understanding played a pivotal role in maintaining a delicate balance in the face of historical rivalries and territorial disputes.

Ablai rarely, if ever, initiated or engaged in military conflicts with Russia along the border. In nearly 50 years of coexistence with the Russians, he successfully maintained peace along the border, preventing Russian incursions into Kazakh territory. Additionally, he facilitated mutually advantageous trade at the border and effectively preserved the territorial integrity of Kazakh land.

In summary, Sultan Ablai's diplomatic policy during the 1730s to 1740s was characterized by a nuanced and multifaceted approach. His strategic collaborations, emphasis on negotiations, and focus on economic interdependence contributed to a diplomatic legacy that aimed at fostering stability and prosperity in the complex border areas under his rule.

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RSAAA — Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts. Moscow, Russian Federation

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SAOR — State Archives of the Orenburg Region. Orenburg, Russian Federation

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ҚР ҒЖБМ ҒК Ш.Ш. Уәлиханов атындағы Тарих және этнология институты ШЖҚ  
РМҚ Тел.: +7 (727) 261-67-19, +7 (727) 272-47-59

Е-mail: [edu.history@bk.ru](mailto:edu.history@bk.ru)  
Журнал сайты: <https://edu.e-history.kz>

Ш.Ш. Уәлиханов ат. ТжЭИ басылған:  
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