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HIERARCHIES OF THE FRONTIER: POWER PRACTICES IN THE COLONIZED URALS AND TRANS-URALS (15TH - 18TH CENTURIES)

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Abstract. The paper identifies the main ways of organizing power hierarchies in the vast region of the Urals and the Trans-Urals from the middle of the 15th century — the time when the Moscow state began its expansion towards the North-Western Urals, — though the middle of the 16th century (the emergence of the Stroganov latifundia in the Kama region with the subsequent conquest of the Western Siberia by Ermak's military expedition organized by Stroganovs) to the early 18th century. This region was characterized by a complex ethnic and confessional composition, with local elites that predated the arrival of the Moscow state and maintained intricate relations with Muscovite authorities. Drawing on chronicles and administrative documents of the period, as well as the works of contemporary scholars in ethnic and estate history, I aim to highlight specific practices of the central government that combined efforts to unify forms of rule with attempts to transform elements of the regional diversity — Slavic, Finno-Ugric, and Turkic groups — into 'quasi-estates', each assigned a distinct 'service' within the framework of the emerging empire. The article analyses the previously largely unexplored issue of the disappearance of the Komi-Permyak population in the Middle Kama region — within the Stroganovs' "latifundia."

Keywords: early modernity, colonialism, Muscovite state, Urals, Trans-Urals, Stroganovs

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ФРОНТИР ИЕРАРХИЯЛАРЫ: ОТАРЛАНҒАН ОРАЛ МЕН ТРАНС-ОРАЛДАҒЫ БИЛІК ТӘЖІРИБЕЛЕРІ (XV-XVIII ҒАСЫРЛАР)

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ИЕРАРХИИ ФРОНТИРА: ПРАКТИКИ ВЛАСТИ ПРИ КОЛОНИЗАЦИИ УРАЛА И ЗАУРАЛЬЯ (XV–XVIII ВЕКА)

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Аңдатпа. Мақалада XV ғасырдың ортасынан бастап Орал мен Жайықтың кең аумағында билік иерархияларын ұйымдастырудың негізгі әдістері зерттеледі — Мәскеу мемлекеті Солтүстік-Батыс Орал аймағында— XVI ғасырдың ортасына қарай өзінің экспансиясын бастаған (Строгановтардың ауқымды «латифундиясы» Прикамияда пайда болған кезде және Строгановтардың қаражатына Ермактың әскери экспедициясы ұйымдастырылып, Батыс Сібірді жаулап алумен аяқталды) - және XVIII ғасырдың басына дейін.

Біз Мәскеу мемлекеті келгенге дейін болған, жергілікті элиталар мен билік дәстүрлері бар күрделі этникалық және конфессиялық құрам-мен сипатталатын аймақ жайлы айтып отырмыз.

Біз Мәскеу мемлекетінің келуіне дейін-ақ өзіндік билік дәстүрлері мен жергілікті элиталары қалыптасқан, күрделі этникалық және конфессиялық құрамымен ерекшеленген аймақ туралы қарастырамыз. Сол дәуірдің жылнамалары мен әкімшілік құжаттарына, сондай-ақ этникалық және сословиелік тарих саласындағы қазіргі зерттеушілердің еңбектеріне сүйене отырып, автор биліктің басқару жүйесін біріздендіруге бағытталған әрекеттерін және сонымен қатар аймақтық алуандықтың — славян, фин-угор және түркі топтарының — жекелеген элементтерін «квазисословиелерге» айналдыруға ұмтылысын айқындауға талпынады. Әрбір осындай топқа қалыптасып келе жатқан империя шеңберінде өзіндік «қызмет ету» функциясы жүктеледі. Мақалада, әсіресе, Орта Кама өңіріндегі строгановтардың «латифундиясы» аумағында коми-пермяк халқының жойылып кетуі мәселесіне ерекше назар аударылады, бұл тақырып осы уақытқа дейін ғылыми тұрғыда жеткілікті деңгейде зерттелмеген.

Түйін сөздер: ерте заманауи, отаршылдық, Мәскеу мемлекеті, Орал, Жайық, Строгановтар.

Аннотация. В статье исследуются основные способы организации властных иерархий на обширной территории Урала и Зауралья с середины XV века — периода, когда Московское государство начинает свою экспансию в Северо-Западном Приуралье, — к середине XVI века (когда в Прикамье появляется обширная «латифундия» Строгановых и на средства Строгановых организуется военная экспедиция Ермака, завершившаяся завоеванием Западной Сибири) — и до начала XVIII века. Мы говорим о регионе, характеризовавшемся сложным этническим и конфессиональным составом, с локальными элитами и традициями власти, существовавшими ещё до прихода Московского государства. Опираясь на хроники и административные документы того периода, а также на работы современных ученых в области этнической и сословной истории, автор стремится определить практики центральной власти, сочетавшие усилия по унификации форм управления с попытками преобразовать элементы регионального разнообразия — славянские, финно-угорские и тюркские группы, — в «квазисословия», каждому из которых назначается особое «служение» в рамках формирующейся империи. В статье особое внимание уделяется ранее практически не исследованной проблеме исчезновения коми-пермяцкого населения Средней Камы — на землях строгановской «латифундии».

Ключевые слова: ранний модерн, колониализм, Московское государство, Урал, Зауралье, Строгановы

Introduction

In this article, I seek to identify the principal modes of organizing power hierarchies in the vast region of the Urals and the Trans-Urals from the mid-fifteenth century (when the Muscovite state began its expansion into the northwestern Cis-Urals), through the mid-sixteenth century (the emergence of the Stroganov latifundia in the Kama region and the subsequent conquest of Western Siberia by Yermak's Cossack expedition, organized by the Stroganovs), to the early eighteenth century. This region was characterized by a complex ethnic and confessional composition, with local elites that predated Muscovite incorporation and maintained intricate relations with Muscovite authorities. Drawing on chronicles and administrative documents of the period, as well as on contemporary scholarship in ethnic and estate history, I highlight specific practices of the central government that combined efforts to standardize forms of rule with attempts to recast elements of regional diversity — Slavic, Finno-Ugric, and Turkic groups — into "quasi-estates", each assigned a distinct "service" within the framework of the emerging empire.

This article deals with an enormous region stretching on both sides of the Ural Mountains — from the Kama and even the Vychegda rivers in the west to the Ob River in the east, and from the seas of the Arctic Ocean in the north to the steppes of Kazakhstan in the south. The region was marked by considerable ethnic, cultural, and political diversity. As early as the ninth century, the ancestors of the Hungarians began their westward migration from this area — which is why the Hungarian homeland, *Hungaria Magna,* is often localized within the territory of present-day Bashkortostan (Belavin et al., 2021). In the early Middle Ages, the northwestern part of the region became involved in the international fur trade conducted by the Volga Bulgars, who used the Volga, the Kama, and Kama's numerous tributaries as trade arteries. Owing to this centuries-long commerce, shrines of Komi and Mansi ancestors accumulated large quantities of silver vessels from Iran, Byzantium, and the South Caucasus — so much so that Novgorodian *ushkuiniki* raiders and the princes of Vladimir-Suzdal Rus' frequently launched military expeditions in search of the coveted "silver beyond the Kama". Trade across the Urals was carried out along the Chusovaya, Iset, and Tobol rivers, through which goods from Central Asia reached the Kama and the middle Volga regions.

After the Mongol conquest, from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, the region became a crossroads for multiple political actors:

— *Novgorodian Rus'.* The territories of the northern Kama basin and the northern Trans-Urals — *Perm and Yugra* — consistently appear among Novgorod's volosti (districts) in all treaties that Novgorod concluded with the princes of Tver and Moscow between 1264 and 1471.

— *The Principality of Rostov.* Notably, the town of Veliky Ustyug was subordinate to Rostov; its native Stephen of Perm became the first Christian missionary in the northwestern Cis-Urals. Following the example of Cyril and Methodius, the so-called "Apostles to the Slavs", he created the Old Permic alphabet *(anbur)* for the language of Komi, translated the Gospel into that language, and in 1379 — according to the Vychegda-Vym' Chronicle (composed from 1580 until the end of the 18th century, published in 1958) — set out alone to preach in the lands of Perm Vychegodskaya and Perm the Great, establishing an episcopal see in the small town of Vym' a few years later.

— *The Kazan and Siberian Khanates,* two Chinggisid polities that took shape in the territories of the Ulus of Juchi, on the middle Volga and in Western Siberia, respectively.

— *The Nogai Horde,* a powerful Turkic nomadic polity that from the late fifteenth to the early seventeenth century periodically extended its authority over the southern Urals and Trans-Urals — territories inhabited by Turkic- and Ugric-speaking groups (roughly corresponding to today's Chelyabinsk Region and Bashkortostan, extending up to the upper reaches of the Chusovaya) — which at other times were subject to the political influence of the Siberian Khanate (Samigulov, 2012).

— It is essential to keep in mind *the region's indigenous political actors:* the Komi-Permyak "princes" and "petty princes" *(knjaz'ja i knjažata)* of Great Perm (both those who accepted Christianity and those who maintained traditional religious practices); the Mansi "princes" of the Pelym, Sosva, Obdorsk, and Konda "principalities," as well as the elites of Selkup Pegaya Horde — polities located in the eastern Urals and the Ob basin and dependent on the Siberian Khanate; and representatives of the Bashkir (and, more broadly, Turkic-speaking) elites of the Middle and Southern Urals and the Trans-Urals.

— Finally, from the mid-fifteenth century the *Muscovite state* increasingly asserted its influence in the region; it was precisely in this period that the conception of autocratic power took shape in Muscovy — a development that would decisively shape the history of Moscow itself and of the regions subsequently brought under its authority[1].

As Muscovy's political expansion advanced eastward, the region assumed the role of a "frontier," which it retained until the first third of the eighteenth century — when, among other things, the southeastern Trans-Urals became a contact (and conflict) zone with the Dzungar state. And, as with most frontiers in human history, practices of power and hierarchy — formed under the influence of several political forces, none of which could secure complete dominance for a considerable time — constituted here a contested field, a complex "game" of overlapping claims and accommodations.

In the article, I would like to examine four cases that illustrate four distinct tactics by which the Muscovite state sought to "appropriate" or "domesticate" the Urals and Trans-Urals politically:

1. *Great Perm, 1451–1505:* a model of achieving dominance: "our man in a distant region" → "provoking a conflict, military defeat, captivity" → "a formerly independent prince returning to the region as an imperial official."
2. *The Stroganov latifundia, 1558 to the early eighteenth century:* the grand prince of Moscow "grants" an ostensibly uninhabited region to a family of powerful merchant entrepreneurs engaged in large-scale salt production, obliging them to supply salt and monetary payments to the treasury, to suppress uprisings among the local population with their own armed forces, and to repel external threats.
3. *Yermak's campaign, 1581–1585:* a "private military company" raised and financed by the Stroganovs conquers the Siberian Khanate on behalf of its patrons, yet ultimately "presents" this conquered polity to the Muscovite tsar. The implications of this act of "presentation" for the subsequent history of Siberia.
4. The "yasak-paying" and "service" *populations of the Urals and Trans-Urals, sixteenth to eighteenth centuries:* practices through which territorial, clan-based, and tribal communities were transformed into quasi-estate categories.

[1] A synthesis of research on the genesis of the concept can be seen in Konstantin Yerusalimskii's book The Emperor of Holy Rus' (2025). The deliberate anachronism in the book's title ("emperor") is intended to signal that, under Peter I, the conception of autocracy formed in the preceding era underwent only a minor "designer rebranding."

I. Perm the Great

As mentioned above, the vast territories stretching eastward from Veliky Novgorod to the Urals and the Trans-Urals, inhabited by peoples speaking Finno-Permic, Ugric, and Samoyedic branches of the Uralic language family, were traditionally counted by Novgorod among its possessions, its volosti (districts). In practice, Novgorod's authority over these enormous lands was largely nominal and manifested itself primarily in the fact that, from time to time, detachments of ushkuiniki were dispatched to collect a form of natural "tax" (yasak) in the form of furs and occasionally silver.

Over time, Novgorod acquired powerful competitors. In 1212, the prince of Rostov the Great founded the town of Ust-Yug (Veliky Ustyug), which brought under its influence the lands along the Dvina, Vychegda, and Sukhona rivers. The bishopric established in Perm Vychegodskaya by Stephen of Perm — himself a native of Veliky Ustyug — may likewise be seen as a form of consolidating Rostov's influence in the region against Novgorod's. For example, according to the Ust-Vym Chronicle, the very act of placing the Perm bishopric "in the patrimony of the Holy Sophia" (that is, on the lands which were under the authority of the archbishop of Novgorod) became the cause of an armed clash in 1385 between the forces of the Novgorodian archbishop and the militia of Ustyug; on that occasion, the Novgorodians were defeated.

In the fourteenth century, the struggle for influence over Perm Vychegodskaya and Perm the Great — lying further to the east — was joined by the principality of Moscow. In 1333, the Novgorodians and the people of Ustyug conceded to the Muscovite prince Ivan Kalita the right to collect from the Perm lands the tribute owed to the Gold Horde. Saint Stephen of Perm ended his life in Moscow and was buried in the Cathedral of the Savior on Bor in the Moscow Kremlin — an event that Moscow would later actively employ as a form of "symbolic capital".

In July 1451, at the end of the war for the Muscovite throne against his cousin Dmitry Shemiaka (who, importantly, enjoyed the support of Veliky Novgorod), the Muscovite prince Vasily II (Vasily the Blind) appointed three members of the local Komi aristocracy as his governors in Perm Vychegodskaya (also known as Old Perm, with its center in Vym') and in Great Perm (with its center in Cherdyn'). The Vychegda-Vym' Chronicle refers to them under their Christian names: prince Ermolai and his two sons, princes Vasily and Mikhail. The "princes" received baptism in Vym; thereafter, Ermolai and Vasily Ermolayevich remained to rule in Perm Vychegodskaya, while Mikhail Ermolayevich proceeded farther east — to Cherdyn'. According to the interpretation proposed by the Perm historian Pavel Korchagin, who also provided a detailed overview of the scholarly debate on the origin of the Permian "Ermolayevich" princely line, these actions should be understood as Moscow's obtaining a kind of additional "sanction" for a form of authority that these "princes" already exercised in practice, and were not unwilling to rely on distant Moscow in order to distance themselves from their nominal "suzerain", Novgorod (Korchagin, 2011). Otherwise, it is difficult to explain, among other things, the peaceful enthronement of Mikhail Ermolayevich in Great Perm, over which Moscow exercised no real authority in 1451.

An important episode connected with Vasily Ermolayevich, the prince of Perm Vychegodskaya, sheds light on a political practice that, several years later, the Muscovite prince would apply to the Permian princes themselves. The Ustyug Chronicle, in its entry for 1465, reports the participation of the Vychegda prince in a campaign organized by the Muscovite prince — by that time Ivan III — beyond the Urals against one of the Mansi "principalities":

> "…Велел князь великий Иван Васильевичь Василью Скрябе устюжанину Югурьскую землю воивати. А шли с ним хотячие люди, да с ним же ходил князь Василеи Вымскии Ермоличь с вымичи и с вычегжаны. А пошла рать с Устюга месяца маия в 9 день. Они же, шедше, да Югорскую землю воивали, и полону много вывели, и землю за великаго князя привели. А князей югорских — Калпака да Течика — к великому князю Ивану Васильивичю на Москву правели, и князь великий их пожаловал Югорским княжением и отпустил их в Югру, а на них дань возложил и на всю землю Югорскую…" (The Arkhangelsk (Ustyug) Chronicle, 1972, p. 91).

Thus, by order of the Muscovite prince, the Ustyug and Vychegda force captured two members of the local elite (in this case, Mansi leaders); together with the spoils and other captives, they were brought to Moscow, after which they received from the Muscovite ruler a "sanction" to exercise authority over their own lands and were sent back as vassals of Moscow, obliged to pay the tribute that had been imposed. It is worth noting that the Muscovite princes may have been aware of comparable political practices in Byzantium, where, beginning in the eighth century, this mechanism was applied to members of political elites in the South Caucasus and the Balkans (when a Bulgarian or Kartvelian leader captured in battle would return home from captivity as an imperial official bearing the title of strategos or patrikios). They certainly knew also of an analogous practice from the example of their own ancestors, who had received similar "sanction" to rule their lands after periods of captivity in the Horde. Yet, as far as we can tell, Ivan III appears to have been the first Muscovite ruler to employ such a political technique in his own political practice.

Six years later, in 1471, the forces of Ivan III defeated the Novgorodians at the Battle of Shelon. The Novgorod – Moscow war of 1471, which led to the destruction of the Novgorod Republic and its subordination to Moscow, nevertheless ended with the conclusion of a peace treaty — the so-called Korostyn' Peace of August 11 — which preserved for Novgorod the appearance of independence. In this treaty, as in all earlier agreements concluded between Novgorod and the grand princes, Perm and Yugra were listed among the Novgorodian "volosti" (Valk, 1949).

However, according to the Vychegda–Vym' Chronicle (1958), in the same year Moscow organized a military campaign against the Kazan Khanate, and Ivan III ordered the "Cherdynians", that is, the forces of Great Perm, to join this campaign. Prince Mikhail Ermolayevich of Perm hesitated to take part in a military operation against one of the "superpowers" of the region — and one geographically far closer to Perm than distant Moscow. Chronicle directly accuses him of pro-Kazan sympathies: "cherdyntsy … za kazantsov zadalísia" ("the Cherdynians … sided with the Kazan people") (Vychegodsko-Vym' Chronicle, 1958, p. 262). Ivan III interpreted this refusal as a sign of political disloyalty, citing the chronicle's formulation: "peremeki za kazantsov norovili, gostem kazanskim pochesti vozdavali, lyudem torgovym knyazya velikova grubili" ("the Permians favored the Kazan side, received Kazan merchants with honors, and treated the grand prince's own merchants with disdain") (Ibid., p. 262). He used this refusal as a pretext for launching a punitive campaign against Great Perm.

The Ustyug military commander (voevoda) Fedor Pestrii was ordered to assemble forces in the territories of the former Novgorodian volosti and, in the summer of 1472, struck at Great Perm. In several engagements he seized all fortified settlements of the Permians, destroyed the remaining pagan shrines, captured prince Mikhail Ermolayevich and his commanders, and

sent them as prisoners to Ivan III in Moscow. What followed was precisely the pattern we have already observed in the case of the Mansi "princes" captured in 1465: Ivan III "released" the Permian prince and sent him back to Perm as his namestnik (governor). The descendants of Mikhail Ermolayevich continued to serve as Muscovite governors of Great Perm until 1505, when the new Muscovite sovereign Vasily III "became angered and removed" the last representatives of the Permian princely dynasty from the governorship (Vychegodsko-Vym' Chronicle, 1958, p. 264). From that point on, Perm lost even the appearance of autonomy and was governed exclusively by officials appointed directly from Moscow.

II. The establishment of the Stroganov latifundia (1558) and the problem of the Middle Kama Komi population disappearance

On April 4, 1558, six years after the conquest of the Kazan Khanate, Ivan IV "the Terrible," the son of Vasily III who had destroyed the last remnants of Great Perm's independence, — responded to a petition submitted by a private individual, the merchant and salt producer Grigori Stroganov. Ivan granted him a privilege unprecedented among earlier Muscovite rulers: he endowed Grigori with hereditary rights to an enormous region along the middle course of the Kama River. Ten years later, in 1568, Grigori's brother Iakov Stroganov received a similar charter from Ivan IV, granting him possession of lands in the basins of the Chusovaya and Sylva rivers, the two largest eastern tributaries of the Kama (Müller, 1750, pp. 76–80, 80–84).

The charters contain sworn declarations by both brothers that the vast territory they claimed — encompassing the entire Western Cis-Urals from Great Perm in the north to the lands of the former Kazan Khanate in the south — was completely uninhabited. (Grigori's assertion was confirmed under oath by a certain Permian official named Kodaul, who had brought tribute from Great Perm to Moscow). The brothers undertook obligations to build small towns and fortified settlements to defend the region against raids by the Nogais and Siberian Tatars; to attract free settlers to these lands; to organize timber cutting and the clearing of land for arable fields; and, above all, to expand salt production — an enterprise in which their father had already prospered in their native Sol' Vychegodskaya. In turn, Ivan the Terrible granted the Stroganovs permission to maintain their own armed retinues and militia forces, removed both them and the people they brought onto their estates from the jurisdiction of the Perm and Kazan governors, and exempted their lands from all taxes and dues for the first twenty years.

Indeed, within a few years an emerging administrative polity took shape along the middle Kama and its tributaries, complete with its own economic activities, judicial structures, and armed retinues. A series of fortified settlements were constructed, and numerous salt works established. In 1572, at Ivan IV's request (Gramota to Iakov and Grigori Stroganov, 1572/1846) the Stroganovs' retinues and militia forces suppressed an uprising of the Mari, Bashkir, Khanty, and Mansi along the Kama and its tributaries.

Owing to later grants issued by Ivan the Terrible and subsequent tsars in 1574, 1597, 1615, 1685, 1694, and 1701, the Stroganov domain expanded by the early eighteenth century to 6,639,000 desiatinas (approximately 72,500 square kilometers) on both sides of the Ural Mountains — an area twice the size of Belgium and roughly equivalent to that of modern Bavaria or North Dakota.

Several considerations, however, give me pause. First, across the Stroganov domains (and the territory of the modern Perm region) there exist thousands of rivers and streams bearing

distinct Komi-Permyak names: Gaiva, Sylva, In'va, Kos'va, Tulva, Nytva, Lys'va, and many others. It is therefore reasonable to assume that, by the time the Stroganovs arrived in the Kama region, the area was already evenly populated by speakers of the Komi-Permyak language. This, in turn, raises doubts about the good faith of Grigori and Iakov Stroganov's sworn claims that the region was completely uninhabited.

Second, it is difficult to believe that the rapid success of the Stroganovs' salt-production enterprises — which soon made them among the wealthiest individuals in the Muscovite realm (Vvedenskii, 1962) — was achieved solely by bringing into their supposedly uninhabited estate people described as nepismenye i netyaglye (that is, persons who were free — unenslaved — but also unregistered in Muscovite tax censuses). The hypothesis proposed by the Perm historian Vitaly Mingalyov appears more convincing: namely, that the swift growth of the Stroganov estate's economic prosperity was made possible by the enserfment and exploitation of the local Komi-Permyak population at the salt works — people who were indeed nepismenye i netyaglye, meaning not registered by Muscovite officials.

Third and finally, if one overlays maps of the principal Stroganov centers of salt production and copper smelting, on the one hand, with maps of contemporary Komi-Permyak settlement, on the other, it becomes evident that Komi-Permyak communities have survived precisely in those areas that lay either outside Stroganov latifundia or sufficiently distant from the centers of their industrial activity. Given the extremely harsh labour conditions at sixteenth-century saltworks, it seems possible to consider hyper-exploitation as a factor in the disappearance of the Komi-speaking population, alongside more intensive process of assimilation and russification near Stroganov production centres.

III. The Stroganovs' "private military company" and the conquest of Siberian Khanate

On May 30, 1574, in Aleksandrova Sloboda — the Oprichnina capital of Ivan IV — the Stroganov brothers received from the tsar their third charter in response to a petition they had submitted. A copy of the original 1574 charter preserved by the Stroganovs is reproduced by Gerhard Friedrich Müller in his Opisanie Sibirskogo tsarstva [Description of the Siberian Tsardom] (1750). This time, the tsar "granted" Stroganovs extensive lands beyond the Urals, on the watershed between the Chusovaya and Tobol rivers, as well as along the middle course of the Tobol, the largest tributary of the Irtysh. But how could such a "grant" be made of territories that belonged to a neighboring state, the Siberian Khanate?

The text of the charter presents four arguments, not entirely consistent with one another, yet together giving the "grant" an appearance of legitimacy:

1. An argument from military expediency: the Stroganovs are permitted to pursue, within the territory of the Siberian Khanate, the detachments of Siberian Tatars who raid Stroganov fortified settlements and industrial sites.
2. An argument from "empty" and "undeveloped" lands: as in the earlier charters, it is asserted that the region is completely uninhabited, and the Stroganovs are instructed to settle it and bring it under economic cultivation.
3. An argument to a request for voluntary incorporation — one that plainly contradicts the preceding claim: it is asserted that groups of Khanty (Ostyaks) are asking to enter Muscovite subjecthood voluntarily and to receive protection from the Siberian Tatars.

4. Finally, a claim to preexisting legitimacy of Muscovite possession: the charter states that the lands being granted are the rightful patrimony of the Muscovite sovereign, are "…nashei otchinoi za Yugorskim kamenem v Sibirskoi ukraine, mezh Sibiri i Nagai Takhchei…" ("…our patrimony beyond the Yugorian Stone [i.e., the Ural Mountains] in the Siberian frontier, between Siberia and the Nogai encampments…") (Müller, 1750, p. 87). One may plausibly connect this Ivan IV's assertion with the aforementioned campaign of the Ustyug men and the prince of Vychegda against Yugra in 1465. His claims to Siberian lands may also have been formally supported by the fact that from 1555 to 1563 the murza Ediger, predecessor of Khan Kuchum on the throne of the Siberian Khanate, acknowledged himself a tributary of Moscow.

In effect, of course, the charter amounted to the tsar's endorsement of the Stroganovs' further military and economic expansion into Siberia itself — an expansion whose potential risks were offset by the fact that neither the Muscovite treasury nor the Muscovite army would have to take part in the likely impending conflict. For the Stroganovs, the charter promised access to the Siberian fur trade and the opportunity to gain control over the routes of trans-Ural commerce with Central Asia (Korchagin & Samigulov, 2023).

The events that followed — the campaign of Ermak and the Russian conquest of Western Siberia — have generated an extensive scholarly literature (Thyrêt, 2017; Solodkin, 2015; Matveev & Tataurov, 2012; Trepavlov, 2012; Zuev & Slugina, 2015; Sal'manov, 2021). Here I will highlight only a few points relevant to the present paper. Seeking to make use of the rights granted to them by the tsar's charter, the Stroganovs, at their own expense, created a kind of "private military company" by inviting into their service, in 1578, a detachment of Volga Cossacks led by the ataman Ermak Timofeevich.

In September 1581, Ermak's "army" (approximately 840 men) set out from Orel-gorodok, ascended the Chusovaya river, wintered on the passes of the main Ural ridge, and in the spring of 1582 crossed into Western Siberia. Fighting its way down the Tura and Tobol rivers and ravaging Tatar and Mansi fortified settlements, the detachment advanced to the confluence of the Tobol and the Irtysh, where, in the battle at Chuvash Cape on November 5, 1582, it defeated the forces of Khan Kuchum and seized Isker (Kashlyk), the capital of the Siberian Khanate.

In the months that followed, the character of Ermak's actions changed: he began to act not as the head of the Stroganovs' private military company but as the authorized representative of Ivan the Terrible. Acting independently of the Stroganovs, he dispatched an official embassy to Moscow reporting the acquisition of a "new tsardom" for the tsar and, in the tsar's name, accepted oaths of allegiance from the leaders of Mansi, Tatar, and Khanty clans. It should be added that in February 1583 Ermak captured Sultan Mametkul (Muhammad-Kuli), a nephew of Khan Kuchum, and sent him to Moscow; several other Siberian princelings (tsarevichi) later arrived there as well. Some of them accepted baptism and subsequently entered the ranks of Russian princely families.

Thus the character of the expansion changed: it was no longer a private undertaking of the Stroganov merchant-entrepreneurs seeking to make use of the opportunities granted to them by the tsar's žalovannaya gramota of 1574, but a state enterprise aimed at the appropriation and incorporation of the newly acquired tsardom — a territory comparable in size to the entire European part of Muscovite Rus'. Despite the fact that the war against Kuchum and later his descendants continued into the 1680s (Trepavlov, 2012), the Muscovite government took all

possible measures to ensure that it — and it alone — would secure all the benefits of the new "acquisition":

1. In 1596–97 the Babinov Road across the Urals was constructed, and in 1620 all other routes of travel into and out of Siberia were prohibited. (This ban dealt a serious blow, among other things, to the Pomor fur trade conducted along the Arctic coast and contributed to the demise of "golden-boiling Mangazeya.") It is worth noting that the Babinov Road was deliberately built around the Stroganov estates in the Kama region: it began in Solikamsk, north of their domain, and ended in Verkhotur'e, where a special customs post was established.

2. A program of building numerous forts and fortified settlements along the rivers of Western Siberia was initiated; the resettlement of peasants from the European part of Russia into Siberia was actively encouraged; and a "grain tax" was introduced to supply Siberia until the colonists could produce sufficient grain for themselves. Moreover, already in the final years of the sixteenth century, alongside free settlers, exiles were being sent to Siberia — a specific form of "colonization" that the Russian state has continued to employ to the last time.

3. The populations of the conquered Mansi, Khanty, and Selkup principalities, as well as members of the local Tatar and Bashkir lineages, were enumerated and subjected to yasak — a strictly defined natural tax, above all in furs — in exchange for the right to use their hereditary votchinas (patrimonial lands). Through this system, the Muscovite government became the monopoly holder of a resource of exceptional value, primarily for export: Siberian furs (Etkind, 2011).

IV. *"Yasachnoe"* and *"sluzhiloe"* populations of the Urals and Trans-Urals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: the transformation of traditional social structures into quasi-estates

As the authority of the Muscovite state became established in the lands of the Urals and the Trans-Urals in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the traditional territorial, clan, and tribal structures of the region's Finno-Ugric and Turkic populations underwent significant transformations. Through a combination of legal, economic, and political mechanisms, these groups were, by the early eighteenth century, reshaped into what may be described as quasi-estates. This process has been traced with precision and detail in numerous publications by the Chelyabinsk scholar Gayaz Samigulov (2018; 2022; 2021; 2015; 2025). For understanding the complex dynamic of "yasak-low" in the context of the ethno-social, economic, and legal situation in the Southern Urals and the Trans-Urals see also the document collections edited by Samigulov (2022, 2024).

Samigulov shows that the practice of paying yasak as the primary form of state levy was, to a considerable extent, familiar to the indigenous populations of the Urals and Trans-Urals — hunters, fishers, and pastoralists who had long belonged to groups that, before coming under Muscovite rule, either lay within the sphere of influence or were formal subjects of various polities that emerged after the disintegration of the Golden Horde. In their relations with the state, the payment of yasak functioned as a means of confirming their right to votchina possession of the entire territory of their traditional subsistence economy: hunting grounds, seasonal pastures, beekeeping sites, and other resources.

Over the course of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, however, many of these groups were assigned — in addition to paying yasak — various obligations of state service

(sluzhba): road-maintenance service (mostovaia sluzhba), urban service, and even Cossack service associated with the defense of borderlands (Samigulov, 2025a; 2015). For such groups, votchina possession gradually came to function as an entitlement held in return for service. In this way, the votchina ceased to be merely a traditional clan territory and became a legal institution integrated into the wider imperial system of property. And the groups that had previously been organized primarily along kinship or communal lines were transformed into legal categories with hereditary rights and obligations codified by the state.

At the same time, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, representatives of state authority in the Urals and the Trans-Urals frequently had to adjudicate disputes involving violations of votchina rights belonging to Bashkirs, Mansi, and Khanty — violations committed by Russian peasant settlers who regarded forest hunting grounds or pastures as land that was "ownerless," "vacant," or "unused". With the transformation of the Urals into one of the empire's principal industrial regions in the early eighteenth century, the position of indigenous groups became even more vulnerable.

Conclusion

Taken together, the four cases examined here reveal a consistent repertoire of political practices through which the Muscovite state — and the emerging empire it was in the process of becoming — sought to impose, negotiate, and ultimately institutionalize its authority across the Urals and the Trans-Urals. Whether through the manipulation of local elites in Great Perm, the delegation of quasi-sovereign powers to merchant entrepreneurs in the Kama region, the strategic absorption of the Stroganovs' private conquest of Siberia, or the gradual transformation of indigenous territorial and kin-based communities into legally codified categories of service and taxation, Muscovy deployed a flexible but patterned set of techniques. These techniques combined coercion and accommodation, symbolic claims of patrimonial right and pragmatic reliance on local intermediaries, the extraction of tribute and the creation of new obligations, and the selective incorporation of conquered populations into a developing imperial framework.

What emerges from these processes is a picture of the Urals and Trans-Urals as a frontier not merely in the geographic sense, but as a dynamic zone in which multiple modes of sovereignty overlapped and were renegotiated over several centuries. The Muscovite state did not simply extend a pre-existing administrative model across new territories; rather, it experimented with and refined mechanisms of governance in response to the region's linguistic, cultural, and political diversity, producing new hierarchies and new legally defined social categories in the process.

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