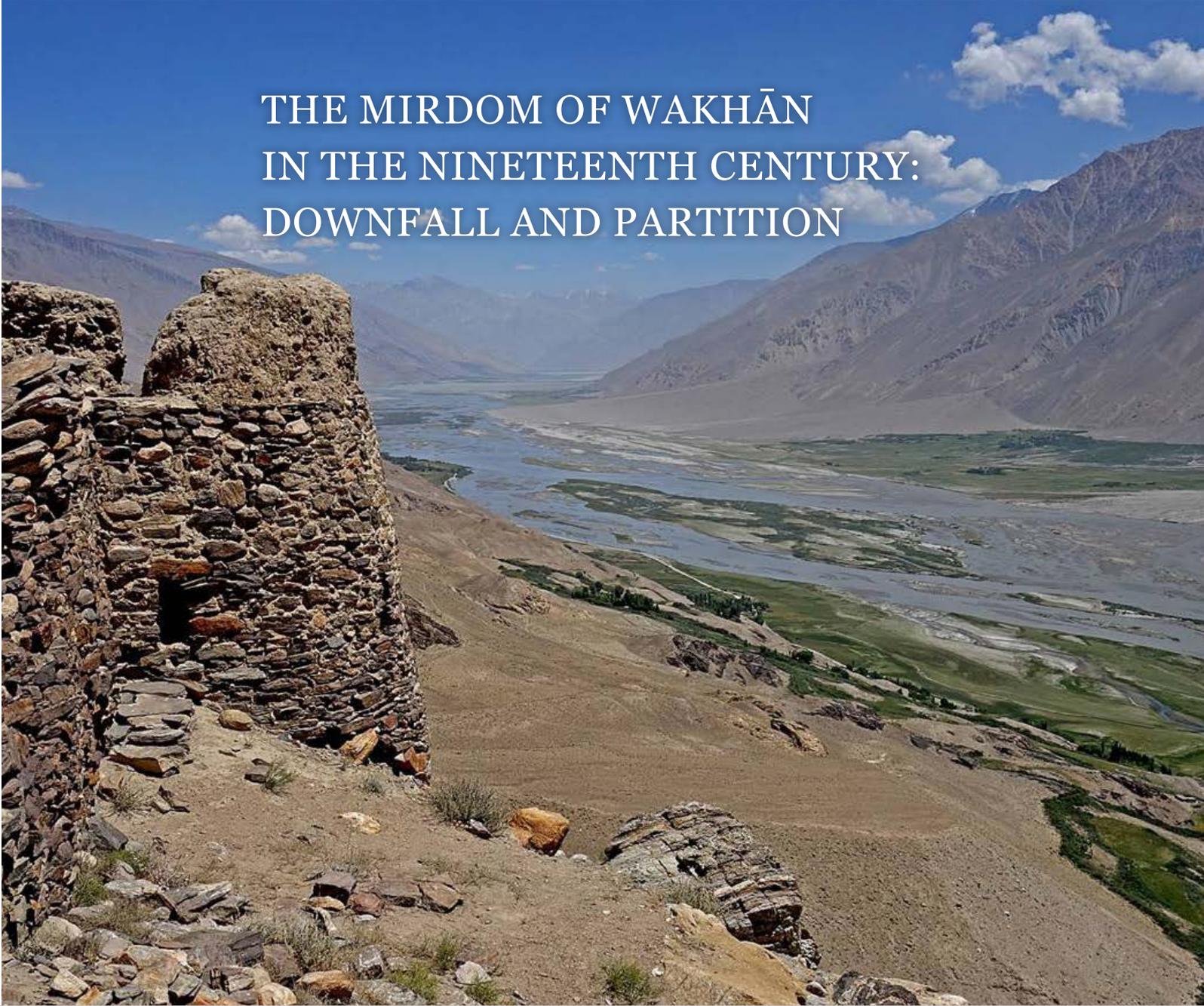




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THE MIRDOM OF WAKHĀN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: DOWNFALL AND PARTITION



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Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit's Research Paper #12

The Mirdom of Wakhān in the Nineteenth Century: Downfall and Partition

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Abstract:

The late nineteenth century was probably one of the most dramatic periods in the history of the small mountainous kingdoms of the Pamirs and the Hindu-Kush. Caught in the crossfires of the Anglo-Russian colonial rivalry in Central Asia, they struggled to survive among their old (the Badakhshī *mīrs*) and newly emerging masters (i.e. the Afghans, the Manghits of Bukhara, the Chinese Qing dynasty); for each of these masters individually tried to seize the moment to claim their so-called “historical rights” over Pamir. Examining the geopolitics of Wakhān in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, this paper advances a broader argument concerning the role and significance of the local powers in shaping the modern political landscape of the region. The later Wakhī rulers, especially Raḥīm Bek (d. 1838), Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1875) and ‘Alī Mardān Shāh (d. 1926) were instrumental in this endeavour by trying to save their mirgdom, which was already on the eve of collapse and colonialization. Its downfall and later division into Afghan and Bukhara domains, was followed by a dark era of ethnic and religious persecutions, displacement of hundreds of Wakhī families, and the emergence of new migrant communities in China (Xinjiang Province) and British India (Northern Areas of modern Pakistan).

Keywords: Badakhshan, Ismaili, *mīr*, Pamir, Panj, Wakhān, Wakhī.

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Cover picture: *The Panj River divides Wakhān into Tajikistan (left) and Afghanistan (right): A view from the ruins of the Yamchun fortress built sometimes during the Kushan period (50 BCE-225 CE). Source: Iloliev 2018: 92-105.*

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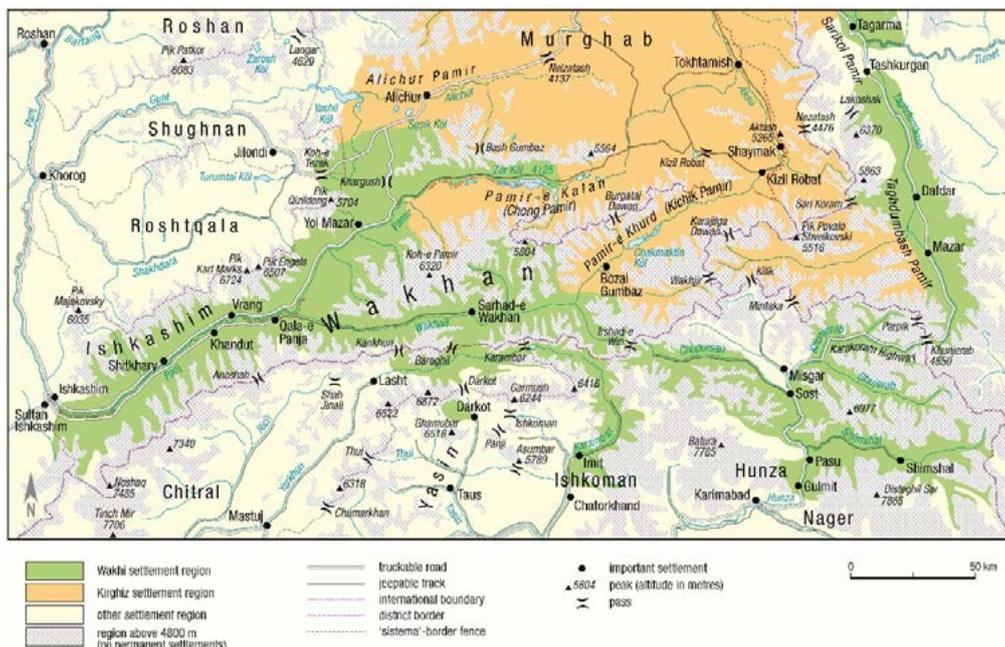
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Introduction¹

Wakhān or *Wakhshu* – an ancient Iranian term for “river country” – is located along the River Wakhān (*Wakhān Daryā* or *Āb-i Wakhān*) and the River Panj in the heart of the Pamirs and the Hindu-Kush mountains. Wakhī people call their area *Wux watan*. It also includes the Great (*kalān*) and Little (*khurd*) Pamirs, which are also known as the Lesser (*past*) and Upper (*uch*) Pamirs in the Wakhī language. Some studies (Pakhalina 1976, Steblin-Kamenskiĭ 1978) indicate that the term “Wakhān” was originally applied to a wider geographic area stretched miles along the shores of the Pamir, Wakhān and Panj rivers up to the confluence of the latter with the River Khingāb (*Āb-i Khingāb*), which flows through a rift valley called Wakhīyā on the margins of Darwāz.²

Presently, Wakhān comprises of two separate subnational entities within the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast of Tajikistan (the Ishkāshīm district/*nāhiya*) and the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan (the Wakhān district/*wuluswālī*) respectively. The majority of the population of these districts consists of the Wakhī or *Xīk*, a group of Eastern Iranian Tajiks, who in addition to their native *Xīk-zīk* (the Wakhī language) also use Persian (called “Tajik” in Tajikistan and “Dari” in Afghanistan) as the medium of instruction. Some villages in the Tajik Wakhān (Wudit, Darshay, Chiltāq, Yamg and Nijgar) have a predominantly Persian speaking (*Pārsī-khān*) population. In addition, few Kyrgyz pastoralists are found around the Little Pamir in Afghanistan. The Wakhī people also live compactly in Pakistan (Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa) and China (the Xinjiang province).



The present-day Wakhī settlement region spreads far beyond the former principality of Wakhan. Their villages are found in areas of resettlement, in regions of refuge and exile. Source: Kreutzmann (2017: 191)

1 I would like to thank Professor Hermann Kreutzmann, the world leading authority in Wakhī studies, for his generous feedbacks, maps, and diagrams used in this article.
 2 In the past, the valley of Wakhīyā was a part of the Darwāz kingdom. The term *Wakhīyā* might refer to Wakhān or people migrated from Wakhān. For instance, Bobrinskiĭ (1908: 63) asserts that in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries a group of people migrated from Wakhān to Darwāz. Today the people of Wakhīyā speak Persian (Tajik) and belong to the Sunni Hanafi Islam. Legends also have it that in ancient times people migrated from Darwāz to Wakhān, and that the famous ancient ruler of Wakhān Qahqaha was the brother of Darwāz ruler Shahshaha (Iliiev 2018: 93).

The history of Wakhān as a kingdom goes back to late BCE, and more importantly, to the time of the Kushan dynasty (50 BCE-225 AD) – an ethnically mixed group of Indo-European Buddhist, who indirectly ruled Wakhān via their semi-independent local rulers. These rulers were in charge of overseeing the traffic of goods and people on the southern route (also called “Buddhist route”) of the famous “Silk Road”, one branch was crossing through Wakhān. I have thoroughly dealt with this topic elsewhere (Iloliev 2018), but suffice it to say that the Kushan period was momentous in the history of Wakhān. For the trade alongside the Silk Road not only brought revenue for the rulers, who collected taxes and provided security and shelter for the merchants and travellers, but also contributed towards the growth of the local economies and cultures. The ruins of numerous fortresses, caravansaries, Buddhist temples, ancient graveyards, and the artefacts discovered in these ruins bear witness to this contribution.

The geographic location of Wakhān – being well connected to China, India and Bactria through numerous mountainous passes and water sources – allowed it to play a vital role in the trade and other encounters of the ancient world. Its capital town of Sakāshīm (“the city of the Sakas”, which is now the town of Ishkāshīm on the left bank of the Panj) is well described in the ninth century Persian book of geography *Hudūd al-‘ālam* (“the Regions of the World”) as a vibrant place, where diverse communities, both the indigenous and newly established Muslims, lived side by side (Minorskiĭ 1980:121). However, the decline of the Silk Road, first during the Chinese Tang dynasty in the tenth century and then with the rise of the maritime routes in the fifteenth century, weakened Wakhān alongside other land routes; its economy declined and its political structure fragmented. During the course of history Wakhān managed to preserve its semi-independence under the protectorate of the bigger regional powers such as the Sāsānids (224-651), the Hephthalities (440s-670), the Turkish Khaqanate (551-744), the Tibetans (618-842), the Chinese Tang (618-907), the Persian Sāmānids (819-999) and later Turkic-Mongol dynasties of Central Asia before being subjugated by the Afghans (the left bank) and the Russians (the right bank) in the late nineteenth century (Iskandarov 1983, Bubnova 2005).



The Panj River divides Wakhān into Tajikistan (left) and Afghanistan (right): A view from the ruins of the Yamchun fortress built sometimes during the Kushan period (50 BCE-225 CE). Source: Iloliev 2018: 92-105.

The late nineteenth century was probably one of the most dramatic periods in the history of Wakhān and other principalities of the Pamirs and the Hindu-Kush. Caught in the crossfires of the Anglo-Russian colonial rivalry (known as the “Great Game”) in Central Asia, they struggled to survive among their old (the Badakhshī *mīrs*) and the newly emerging masters (Yā‘qub Bek of Kashgar, the Afghans, the Manghits of Bukhara and the Chinese Qing); each of these masters individually tried to seize the moment to claim their so-called “historical rights” over them. The theme of the “Great Game” is widely discussed in modern scholarship (Wheeler 1981; Hopkirk 1992; Postnikov 2000; Kreutzmann 2015, 2017), however its impacts on the peripheral nations such as the Wakhīs is open to debate. Examining the geopolitical history of Wakhān in the nineteenth century, this paper advances a broader argument concerning the role and significance of the local powers in shaping the modern political and social landscapes of the region. The later Wakhī rulers, especially Raḥīm Bek (also called Muhammad Raḥīm, d. 1838), Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1875) and ‘Alī Mardān Shāh (d. 1926) were instrumental in this endeavour by trying to save the mirgdom, which was already on the eve of collapse and colonialization.

Our knowledge about the history of Wakhān in the nineteenth century is primarily based on the travelogues, military dossiers and other reports prepared by the European travellers, mainly the British (and their Indian agents) and the Russians. The works of John Wood (1872), Thomas Gordon (1876), Henry Trotter (1878), Dimitri Putyata (1884), Abdul Rahim (1886), Bronisal Grombchevskii (1888), George Curzon (1896), Ole Olufsen (1904), Alexei Bobrinskoï (1908), Vasyli Zaitsev (1908)³, Mikhail Andreev and Alexander Polovtsov (1911), Burhāniddīn Kushkekī (1926), Andreï Snegareov (Baskhanov 2015)⁴ and many others are particularly important in this study. This paper also used archival materials covering the period under investigation from the Institute of Humanities of Khorog (referenced here as IHK), oral materials, and the secondary sources shown in the bibliography.⁵

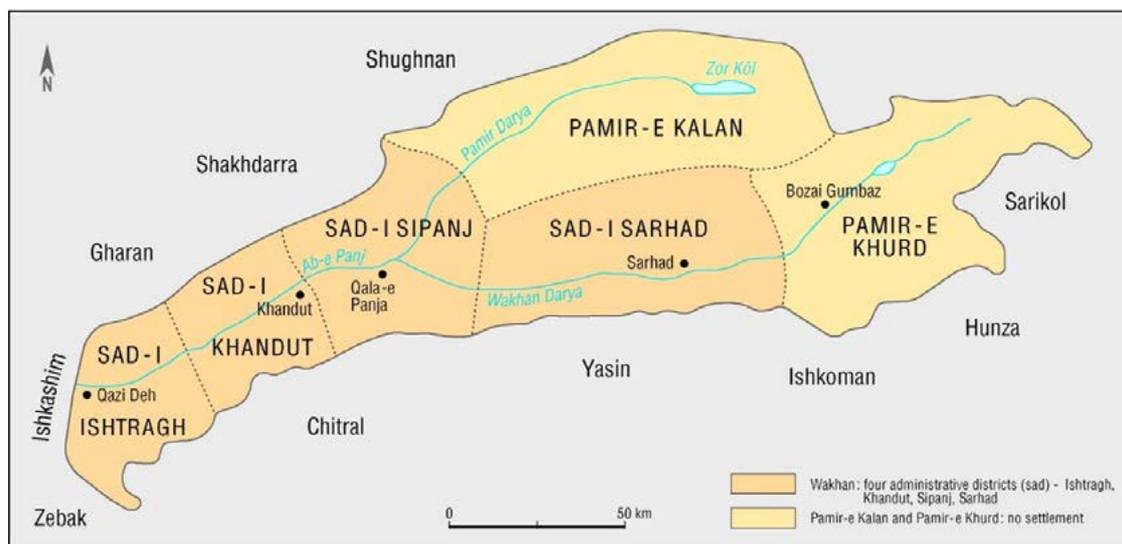
Wakhān and Its Rulers in the Nineteenth Century

Prior to the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia Wakhān was a nominal tributary of Badakhshan. It also paid tribute to the khans of Kokand in its eastern frontiers. Wakhān like its neighbours (Shughnān, Kunjut or Hunza, Chitrāl and Sarikūl) was under constant threat from the growing Chinese colonial expansions in Eastern Turkestan. By the late 1750s, the Chinese army had subjugated Wakhān and Shughnān and established the Yashi-Kūl fort in the Eastern Pamirs (Sheehy 1968: 7). After a short dispute with the Kokand khanate, the Qing dynasty handed over the control of the region to Kokand, which by 1830 expanded its rule into the Eastern Pamirs and began levying taxes on the Kyrgyz and the Wakhī (Newby 2005: 30). With the coming of the British and the Russians in the late nineteenth century, two new regional players – the Afghan and Bukharan emirates – emerged to claim their rights over Wakhān and other principalities of Pamir.

3 From 1893 to 1894 Capitan Vasyli Zaitsev (d. 1931) served as the Head of the Pamir Shift Squad (*Pamirskiy Smenniy Otryad*) – the first Russian military division in Pamir (1891-1918). The Squad was established in 1891 by Colonel Mikhail Ionov in what is today Murgab in the GBAO of Tajikistan, and its first Head was Captain Kuznetsov (1892-93) (Pochekaev 2019: 321).

4 Snegaryov, one of the key players of “the Great Game”, was the Head of Pamir Shift Squad from 1902 to 1903. His “Notes on Pamirs” (Baskhanov 2015: 233) is an invaluable source on the topic under investigation.

5 *IHK* in this article refers to a collection of Russian (and Soviet) documents including reports, military dossiers, decrees, manifestoes and meeting minutes relating late nineteenth and early twentieth century Pamir, which is currently preserved in the Institute of Humanities in Khorog (IHK). These documents were photocopied and brought to Khorog in 1933 from Tashkent.



A map of Wakhan before it was divided between Afghanistan and the Bukhara Emirate as a result of the Granville-Gorchakov Memorandum of 1872-73 and the Pamir Boundary Commission of 1895.

Source: Kreutzmann 2015: 229.

During the colonial expansions the semi-independent mirdom (*mīrīgarī* – principality) of Wakhān consisted of four districts called *sada* (lit. “one hundred”, referring to the number of households) namely Sada-yi Panja (or Spinj, also spelt as Ispanj), Sada-yi Khandut, Sada-yi Ishttrakh (Ishttragh) including villages from Putur on the left bank and Dasht on the right bank of the Panj River to Ratm on the river Pamir (Murghāb), and the Sada-yi Sarhad (or Sarigh Chupān and Pamir) on both banks of the Wakhān Daryā up to the modern Chinese and Pakistani borders (Andreyev and Polovtsov 1911: 7; Kushkekī 1926: 155, Kreutzmann 2015: 229).

The exact number of Wakhān’s population in the nineteenth century is not known, but some contemporary sources assert that there were about 334 households on the left bank of the Panj River and the Sarhad valley (Rahim 1886: 11) and 189 (with 2118 people) on the right bank of the Panj by the year 1901 (Zaĭtsev 1908: 77). The predominantly Kyrgyz populated areas of the Alichur valley and the Great and Little Pamirs were also under the jurisdiction of the Wakhī rulers (Trotter 1878: 178, 210; Postnikov 2000: 41).

The ruler or *mīr* (derived from the Arabic *amīr* – “commander”) was stationed in the village of Qal’ a-yi Panja (“the castle of Panja”) or simply known as Panja on the left bank of the Panj River. The *mīrs* of Wakhān like their subjects, were ethnically Wakhī, although they never stopped claiming foreign ancestry. For instance, the last two *mīrs* believed they were the descendants of Alexander the Great (Wood 1872: 244, Gordon 1876: 132, Putyata 1884: 65). Similarly, they professed the Ismaili faith contrary to other local rulers, for instance those of Shughnān, most of who were Sunnis. In religious matters the *mīrs* like their Ismaili subjects followed a *pīr* (“guide”), who was a part of the well-established and cross-regional network of pirship which was accountable to the Ismaili Imam in India (Iloliev 2013: 155-176). The social status and clan of the *mīrs*, however, differed from the ordinary *murīds* (“religious disciples”). According to Abdul Rahim, a British Muslim spy, who from 1879 to 1880 visited Wakhān and Badakhshan, the ruler and his relatives belonged to “the *mīr* tribe”

(*mīr-kutār*) – a clan which was in control of the political and economic powers in the mirdom (Rahim 1886: 1-10). Assisted by village elderlies or *aqsaqāls* (a Turkish word meaning “white beard”) and *qādīs* (judges), the *mīr-kutār* ruled over the four districts.⁶ We are short of historical sources about the Wakhī *mīrs* prior to the nineteenth century, except for some notes found in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century sources (Gordon 1876: 132; Rahim 1886: 10; Bobrinskoï 1908: 61; Andreyev and Polovtsov 1911: 6; Kushkekī 1926: 169). These sources mention the names of some less known *mīrs* such as Farhād Bek (Maska), Shāh Khushādat (Khāja), Mahdī, Maṣūr, Shāh Jahān (Jān) and Jahān (Jān) Khān. In the *Rāhnamā-yi Qataghān va Badakhshān*, Jahān Khān is named as the father of Muhammad Raḥīm Bek and Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh; after his death the former succeeded him as the *mīr* of Wakhān (Kushkekī 1926: 169). The same line of narration is found in Andreyev and Polovtsov (1911: 6) and Bobrinskoï (1908: 61). However, in the family tree diagram of the Wakhī *mīrs* drawn by Kreutzmann (2017: 110), Jahān Khān (1740-1775) precedes Shāh Jahān, a *mīr* about whom we know almost nothing. Kreutzmann cites Mirza Muhammad Ghufraṅ’s “New History of Chitral” (1974: 91-92), where Jahān Khān is portrayed as a raider and looter of Chitrāl (2017: 110).

Jahān Khān’s name is also mentioned when one of his daughters presumably got married to the ruler of Badakhshan, Zamānuddīn, known also as Mīr Shāh (Bobrinskoï 1908: 62). He is furthermore credited with ordering the design and construction of the Panja castle (*Qal’ a-yi Panja*) on the left bank of the Panj River as the resident of the Wakhī rulers (Bobrinskoï 1908: 63). Qal’ a-yi Panja or simply Panja served as the capital of Wakhān until the early twentieth century before Khandut became the new district centre of the Afghan Wakhān. The arable land of Panja and its geographic location was probably one of the strategic reasons for Jān Khān to establish his seat there. It was closer to Hunzā and Chitrāl, with whose rulers the Wakhī *mīrs* were in good terms, and where they often fled during military raids from Badakhshan.



A panoramic view of Qal’ a-yi Panja – the former capital of the Wakhan principality (left) and the ruins of an old fortress (right).
The picture was taken in January 2012.

⁶ Famous Wakhī *qādīs* of that time were Sarwar from Sarhad (Rahim 1886: 15; Putyata 1884: 17), Ghulāmnabī from Yamg, a village on the right bank of the Panj (Bobrinskoï 1908: 15; McChesney and Khorrami 2013: 646), and Qadam Shah from Shitkharv, a village on the right bank of the Panj (Stein 1928: 869).

Jahān Khān was succeeded by his eldest son Muhammad Raḥīm Bek (d. 1838), who tried to be an independent ruler by disobeying and refusing to pay taxes to Badakhshan, which then was occupied by the Qunduz ruler Murād Bek.⁷ The new ruler of Badakhshan was keen to appointed local governors from among his Uzbek *qarluq* tribesmen, one of whom was Kuhkan Bek. There is a story about Kuhkan Bek's raid to and death in Wakhān, which is vaguely depicted in some European and local sources such as Wood (1872), Bobrinskoï (1908), *Ta'rikh-i Badakhshān* ("History of Badakhshan") translated and edited by Boldirev and Grigorev (1997), *Rāhnamā-yi Qaṭaghān va Badakhshān* ("A Guidebook of Qataghān and Badakhshan") written by Kushkekī (1926). Wood's accounts of the story seem to be more accurate than other narratives, for John Wood and his Persian interpreter Abdul Ghanī were personally witnessing some of the events, which took place at that time in Wakhān and Qunduz. In April 1838 Wood arrived in Panja, the resident of the Wakhī ruler Raḥīm Bek, and reported that seven years ago (i.e. 1830) a murder was committed there (1872: 215). Wood was probably referring to the murder of Kuhkan Bek's brother Muhammad 'Alī Bek or Bahādur Khān according to *Ta'rikh-i Badakhshān* (Boldirev 1997: 82). Nevertheless, all three source believe that the main objective of Kuhkan Bek's raid of Wakhān was to retaliate for the death of his brother and most importantly force Raḥīm Bek pay his tributes to Qunduz.⁸ The story begins with Kuhkan Bek sending his brother Muhammad 'Alī Bek to Wakhān in order to bring the rebellious Wakhī *mīr* under control. Raḥīm Bek, however, refused to obey and subsequently killed the envoy. This story is also depicted by Burhānuddīn Kushkekī, an Afghan scholar and journalist.⁹ Kushkekī (1926: 168-69) narrates that in 1922 he met a 120 year-old man in Panja, who remembered Kuhkan Bek's assault on Wakhān. He also interviewed a member of the *mīr-kutār* Sarbuland Khān, according to whom Muhammad 'Alī Bek raided Wakhān with a Qataghānī army, but he was killed in Panja and his army left the country in despair. His brother Kuhkan Bek then marched towards Wakhān in order to retaliate, but the Wakhī *mīr* was in Chitrāl at that time. Kuhkan Bek then followed him to Chitrāl, where he was well received at the outset by the *mehtar* (ruler) Amān ul-Mulk. However, as the story develops, the *mehtar* changed his mind about hospitality and recruited a killer from among Kuhkan Bek's soldiers to assassinate him. After Kuhkan Bek's death, his army left Wakhān and Chitrāl, and the *mīr* of Wakhān returned to Panja to reclaim his throne. The later events of Raḥīm Bek's life are well reported by Wood (1872: 214-15) and Bobrinskoï (1908: 56-57). The accounts of Wood are particularly important in understanding the complexities of events, which took place during his visit; his trip to Wakhān and its capital Panja coincided with the events of Raḥīm Bek's fight with and eventual murder in Qunduz – a brutal murder which was provoked by Wood's interpreter Abdul Ghanī. It is evident from Abdul Ghanī's writings that he was bias towards the Wakhī people; he polemically called them *rāfiḍah* (lit. "rejectors") – a derogative term used by some Sunnis to denote the Shi'is. Even Wood expressed his disappointments with the way Ghanī behaved, saying that, "He never entered a place without proclaiming his dignity, and demanding something in the Mir's name, threatening those who refused, and making large promises to others who were more compliant" (Wood 1872: 207). In 1838 Wood travelled from Fayzābād to Wakhān passing through Zīkāb and

7 Qunduz was a powerful kingdom which lasted until the 1859 Afghan conquest. Its rulers had always assumed their rights over Badakhshan, Darwāz, Shughnān and Wakhān. In 1823 the Badakhshī army, led by Mīr Yārī Bek Khān for the last time, fought against Murād Bek of Qunduz and managed to preserve its independence for two more years (Wood 1872: 159-160; Barthold 1963: 1024).

8 *Ta'rikh-i Badakhshān* confuses the name of the Wakhī ruler, who killed the Uzbek envoy and later destroyed the army sent for his retaliation. Instead of Raḥīm Bek, it names his father Jahān Shāh, which does not correspond with historical facts. As the translator and editor of "the History of Badakhshan" admits, there are many inaccuracies and misrepresentations in this book when it comes to people's name and data (Boldirev 1997: 8-23).

9 In this work both the original Persian (*Rāhnamā-yi Qaṭaghān va Badakhshān*. Kabul: Vizārat-i ḥarbiya, 1923) and the Russian translation (1926) of Kushkaki's work have been used.

Ishkāshīm. At the time of Wood’s arrival Raḥīm Bek was busy preparing for his trip to Qunduz, where he was summoned by Murād Bek after the dreadful events in Chitrāl. Hence, he could not provide the promised assistance to Wood’s expedition. Wood had a letter from Murād Bek addressed to Raḥīm Bek in which the *qarluq* ruler demanded from the Wakhī *mīr* to guide Wood’s expedition in traveling through the Pamirs and further towards Sarikūl. Murād Bek threatened Raḥīm Bek that, “if a hair of their [Wood and his team] beards was injured, he would definitely kill him: *bekhī mikusham*.” Wood also warned the *mīr* to obey the order or face punishment in Qunduz (Wood 1872: 219). Murād Bek later followed through in his threats and brutally murdered Raḥīm Bek in front of the courtiers and the foreign guests at his court. According to Wood’s interpreter Abdul Ghanī, who was present at the court and gave evidence against Raḥīm Bek, the Wakhī *mīr* was first arrested and then beaten to death by Murād Bek himself, who disliked the gifts presented to him, as well as by a man, whose father was killed in Wakhān during Kuhkan Bek’s invasion.

Murad Beg, who had predetermined the chief’s [Raḥīm Beg] death, inquired of Yesawal [Ghanī], as if casually, whether his party had been well treated in Wakhan? “No”, was the reply. “Kafir,” exclaimed the enraged Uzbek, turning to his victim, “and is it thus you set me at defiance: *kutta chob bizan*, strike him with a club.” (Wood 1872: 257).

After Raḥīm Bek’s murder, a relative of the *mīr* of Badakhshan, Shāh Turai, was appointed the governor of Wakhān by the *mīr* of Qunduz (Bobrinskoï 1908: 57). Shāh Turai’s reign lasted for four years until the death of his patron Murād Bek in 1842, after which Qunduz was taken over by the formerly imprisoned *mīr* of Badakhshan Mīrzā Kalān. The return of Mīrzā Kalān to the throne of Badakhshan provided an opportunity for the younger brother of Raḥīm Bek – Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh, who was in exile in Chitrāl, to claim the throne of Wakhān. He was one of the longest serving rulers of Wakhān in the nineteenth century. His reign consisted of two long periods with a short break in between, when another foreign appointee (discussed later) took control of the mirdom. The first period of Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh’s reign lasted for approximately fourteen years, while the second period was for approximately eleventh years until his death in 1875 (Bobrinskoï 1908: 57). He married the daughter of the *mīr* of Hunza Ghazanfar ‘Alī Khān (1825-1864) after his previous wife, a daughter of the *mehtar* of Chitrāl died. She gave birth to the future and last *mīr* of Wakhān ‘Alī Mardān Shāh (d. 1926). Ghazanfar’s son and successor to the throne of Kunjut Ghazan Khān I (r. 1864-88), married one of the daughters of Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh. The Wakhī *mīr* was also married to the widow of the Shughnī *mīr* Yūsuf ‘Alī Khān; she was a sister of the Sarikūl *mīr* Alif Bek (Gordon 1876: 146-147). Other known sons of Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh were Nasriddīn Shāh or Dumak and Sarbuland ‘Alī Shāh. The first period of Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh’s reign seemed to be relatively calm as he was enjoying the support of his patron, the rulers of Badakhshan, Mīrzā Kalān, Yārī Bek and Sulaymān Shāh. However, he did not get on well with Zamānuddīn, Mīrzā Kalān’s son, who was also known as Mīr-Shāh. He replaced Faṭḥ ‘Alī with his brothers-in-law – Shāh Mīr Bek, a brother of the *mīr* of Shughnān, Yūsuf ‘Alī Khān.¹⁰ Shāh Mīr Bek was known for being an oppressive ruler, who sold many Wakhīs into slavery out of Wakhān (Rahim 1886: 15). According to Bobrinskoï (1908: 58-59) Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh fled to Sarikūl and Shāh Mīr ruled Wakhān for few years before being ousted by the new *mīr* of Badakhshan, Jahāndār Shāh (also known as Ghulām), who succeed his father Mīr Shāh in 1864. Jahāndār Shāh sent a letter to Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh inviting him to come back and retake his throne. Eventually, with the help of his supporters, Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh forced Shāh Mīr to leave Wakhān for good.

10 For more details on the *mīrs* of Shughnān, see Elchibekov (1984: 55-60).

During second period of Fath ‘Alī Shāh’s reign, the struggle for regional power intensified between the local rulers on the one hand and foreign powers on the other hand. To preserve his position as well as keep his people out of trouble, the *mīr* had to please the bigger powers by paying tribute to either of them simultaneously. One of them was Kashgar. Capitalising on the weaknesses of the Kokand ruler, the former lord of Tashkent Atalik Ghāzī (“Warrior Father”) Yā‘qub Bek created his own Muslim state (1867-1879) – the *Etti-shahr* (“seven cities”, also spelt as *Jetti-shaar*) in Kashgar (Boulger 1878). He sent troops to Sarikūl and the Pamirs that were occupied by the Chinese. In 1869 Yā‘qub Bek invaded Tāshqurghān, which once was a flourishing Tajik settlement and forced its native population to migrate to Kashgar and brought the Kirghiz nomads to this land (Trotter 1878: 201). In 1865 the *mīr* of Badakhshan, Jahāndār Shāh (r. 1864-1869) ordered *mīr* Fath ‘Alī Shāh and the governor of Ishkāshīm Haqnazar to assist Yā‘qub Bek in his fight against the Chinese (Rahim 1886: 44). According to Gordon, the Wakhī army led by Fath ‘Alī Shāh took part in the siege of Kashgar, and in the 1865 battle of Kanarik (1876: 134). After the victory over the Chinese, Yā‘qub Bek wrote a letter to Jahāndār Shāh thanking him for the support provided by the Pamirī armies and allowing him to collect taxes from the peoples of Wakhān, Chitrāl, Hunza, Gilgit and Yārkan.

Although the situation in the eastern frontier of Wakhān seemed relatively calm, the real threat was coming from the west as the Afghans began their march towards Qunduz and Badakhshan. This march eventually led to the downfall of Qunduz, Badakhshan and the Pamir principalities. These and other related events are well described in Kātib Hazāra’s famous *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh* (McChesney 2013: 100-109). In 1867 Jahāndār Shāh’s authority was challenged by his half-uncle, the ruler of Balkh, Maḥmud Shāh, who was supported by the Afghan king Sher ‘Alī. Although in 1868 the new king of Afghanistan ‘Abdurrahmān Khān assisted Jahāndār Shāh to return to Fayzābād, he could not quell his enemies at home, and had to flee to Chitrāl and then in 1869 to the Russian Fergana. During Maḥmud Shāh’s rule, Badakhshan was occupied by the Afghans, and Fath ‘Alī Shāh had to pay tribute to the Afghan governor of Balkh and Badakhshan, but he managed to keep his post as the governor of Wakhān.

Anglo-Russian Rivalry

The two major rivalry powers – Russia and Britain – in order to expand their sphere of influence in the region – began to work on dividing the principalities of Pamir, including the Little and the Great Pamirs between their proxies – China, Afghanistan and Bukhara. Rapidly advancing from the northwest, the Russians had already conquered the major cities of Tashkent, Khujand, Samarqand and other major cities of Central Asia by 1860s. In 1867 they created the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan (GGT) ruled by military personnel in the occupied territories of the former Khiva and Kokand khanate (Mackenzie 1967: 265). However, up until the late 1890s the Russians were not physically present in the Tajik populated districts of Wakhān, Ghārān, Shughnān, Rūshān and Darwāz.¹¹ Therefore their understanding of the topography of Pamir and its principalities was as uninformed as that of the British; it is evident from the examination of their reports discussed further. Yet, the British, aiming to stop the Russian advance in the region, were the first to send expeditions to these mountainous regions in order to draw geographic and topographic maps and collect intelligence about the people and cultures of these places. After John Wood’s 1838 expedition, several other

¹¹ For more information on Russian historiography of Pamir, see Pirumshoev (2011).

expeditionary teams were sent to the Pamirs, in which the British Muslim agents from British India were heavily deployed, including Abdul Majīd in 1857-58, Mīrzā in 1868, and Ibrāhīm Khān and Fayz Bakhsh in 1870 (Curzon 1896: 239-260). In 1869 Douglas Forsyth, the British diplomat stationed in India, who sent Fayz Bakhsh to Wakhān and Badakhshan, visited St. Petersburg to present the British position on the demarcation line between Russia and Britain on the northern Afghanistan. He also asked the Russian foreign minister, Alexzander Gorchakov, to officially recognise Yā‘qub Bek’s state, to which the latter showed some reservations due to Russia’s relationship with China, but had emphasised that Yā‘qub Bek should not intervene in the political matters of his neighbours (Postnikov 2000: 44). In 1870 and 1873-74 Thomas Douglas Forsyth himself led two missions to establish trade and diplomatic relation with Yā‘qub Bek, and at the same time to collect intelligence about the Pamirs, Sarikūl, Wakhān, and other principalities close to the Russian frontier in Central Asia (Trotter 1878). As far as Badakhshan and Wakhān were concerned, the British considered them to be parts of Afghanistan. In 1872 the British foreign secretary wrote the following: “Badakhshan with its dependent district of Wakhān from Sarikūl (Lake Wood) in the east to the conjunction of the Kākcha River with Oxus (the Panj River) constitute the northern borders of this Afghan province throughout the region,” (Postnikov 2000: 45). At the outset, the Russians did not accept this British formulation and insisted on considering these countries as independent entities, especially when it came to Wakhān. “A country on the upper Amu Daryā, which also is called *Daryā-yi Panj* (the Panj River) due to the five sources of the Amu Daryā on the northern borders of the Pamir plateau, which divides it from Qarātegin; to the east it borders Sarikūl, which belongs to Yā‘qub Bek; to the north it is separated from Tekhitrar [Chitrāl] (a country totally independent from Kabul) by the Noyk-San mountainous – the continuation of Hindu Kush” (Postnikov 2000: 47). The British responded to this saying that Qarātegin, for instance, was at least 100 miles far from Wakhān, and that “the Russian government had been under a hallucination with regard to the geography of the countries on their own frontiers” (Rawlinson 1873: 110). The Russians despaired and went along with the British position; on 31 of January 1873 the Russian foreign minister Gorchakov wrote a letter to his British counterpart Granville acknowledging that Badakhshan and Wakhān up to the lakes Zorkūl and Sarikūl were parts of Afghanistan (Prescott 1975: 109). This recognition was officially enshrined in the 1873 Anglo-Russian agreement on Pamir, which is historically known as “the Granville-Gorchakov Pact” (GGP), according to which the Amu Daryā from the Zorkūl in the Eastern Pamir to the entrance of the river Kākcha in Badakhshan was accepted as the Anglo-Russian imperial boundary (Prescott 1975: 121).

End of Slavery?

In 1873 Fath ‘Alī Shāh visited Fayzābād to pay tribute to the Afghan deputy governor, Hāfizullā Khān (Gordon 1876: 235-36). It was the first time the Wakhān paid tribute without giving slaves. Slaves were one of the means by which the rulers of the impoverished mountainous regions paid their levy. It is believed the Afghan takeover of Wakhān had officially abolished the slave trade in the region, but practically it continued for sometimes during Afghan and Bukharan rules. Although slavery is prohibited in Islamic scriptures, this rule was not applicable in the Shi‘i regions of Badakhshan including Zībāk, Munjān, Ishkāshīm, Wakhān, Shughnān, Chitrāl, Kunjut, and Sarikūl. The people of these regions alongside Hazāras, Kāfirs, Orthodox Russian serfs and Shi‘i Persians were the main sources of slavery in Central Asia (Hopkins 2008: 641). In fact, based on sectarian prejudices, the Sunni rulers of Badakhshan and Qunduz encouraged the slave trade among the Shi‘is, whom they

regarded as “the heretics” or *rāfiḍah* (Gordon 1876: 147; Rahim 1886:14). For instance, Prescott (quoting Morgan, 1892: 21) – one of the British travellers of that time – describes how dreadful the situation of the mountain Tajiks was in the later nineteenth century:

In the west, along the upper valleys of the upper Amu Darya or Panj, are settlements of Wakhanis Shughnanis, and Roshanis ... The lot of these unfortunate Tajiks, as they are otherwise known, is a peculiarly unhappy one. The victims of cruel and oppressive government, they often abandon their homes in the lower valleys and seek refuge on the inhospitable wastes of the Pamir. Here they are either reduced to slavery by the Khirgiz or driven back by the Chinese, and, in their despair, seek shelter within Russian territory (Prescott, 1975: 104).

In some cases, however, the slave trade crossed sectarian boundaries because it was one of the most profitable and likely the only real businesses for the *mīrs* in the mountainous regions. It is believed that some bandit groups from Shughnān also participated in the slave trade by raiding their coreligionist in Ishkāshīm and Wakhān. Sometimes grouped with the Kyrgyz they attacked Wakhān from the Shākhḍara valley by abducting young boys and girls and then selling them in the markets of Fayzābād (Bobrinskoï 1908: 62-63).

The locals were in a constant state of fear and anticipated ongoing night time raids. In order to save their young boys and girls, they usually hid them in the cowshed or blacken their faces so that they did not appear presentable to the robbers.¹² According to Gordon (1876: 147) a slave, either male or female, would sell for approximately 10-15 bullocks, 5-8 yaks or 2 Kyrgyz guns. Bobrinskoï (1908: 62) also provides some details about price of the slaves in the markets of Badakhshan in the Russian ruble, which were: a young man (*bacha-mard*) 50 rubles; a beautiful girl 100 rubles; and an old man could be sold for 5 rubles if lucky. In addition to Fayzābād, the Wakhī, Shughnī, Chitrālī, and other Shi‘i slaves were also traded in the markets of Balkh, Kabul, Bukhara, Qunduz, and other cities of Central Asia. The last *mīr* of Wakhān is said to have tried to avoid paying tribute to the Afghans via slaves. As Abdul Rahim (1886:12) points out, ‘Alī Mardān, in contrast to his father Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh, would send slaves to Badakhshan only if he was forced to do so, and even though he would take them from Chitrāl or Hunza, but not from Wakhān.

Due to slave trade and other disturbances, the population of Wakhān had dramatically decreased during the political upheavals of the late nineteenth century as many people fled to Sarikūl, Chitrāl, and Hunza (Kreutzmann 2015: 205-293). In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, during the reigns of Shāh Jahān and Jahān Khān, the Wakhīs also migrated to Yārḵand, Qunduz, Osh, and Darwāz (Bobrinskoï 1908: 63). According to Gordon (1876: 134) the population declined from 3 thousand to 500, but the new migrant communities were established in Sanju district of Yārḵand and Sarikūl (50 families) during the reign of Faṭḥ ‘Alī Shāh.

12 I recorded this story from the village elderlies in Yamg (Jumaqul Davlatqadamov) and Zugvand (Shermad, Mirboz Shokimov) in February 2002.

The Last Ruler of Wakhān

Fath ‘Alī Shāh died approximately nine months after Thomas Gordon’s party said farewell to him and left Qal’ a-yi Panja on 26th of April 1874 (Gordon 1876: 123, 152). He then was succeeded by his son ‘Alī Mardān Shāh – the last ruler of Wakhān, who marked the end of the mirdom of Wakhān and its delimitation into the Russian and Afghan spheres of influences. ‘Alī Mardān succeeded his father during a dark period in the history of Wakhān and the Wakhīs. The Anglo-Russian geopolitical rivalry, which by that time had intensified, had a dramatic impact not only on the political stands of the Wakhān ruler, but also on the lives of the ordinary Wakhīs, who had to face Afghan oppression, forced migration, and political separation. This issue will be discussed later, but first it is worth providing some anecdotal information about *mīr* ‘Alī Mardān. Our knowledge of his life and activities is mainly based on the local oral stories and the accounts of the late nineteenth century Russian and European travellers, some of whom had personally met the *mīr*, including Scottish Thomas Gordon (1876), English Henry Trotter (1878), Russians Dimitri Putyata (1883) and Bronislav Grombchevskii (1888). As mentioned earlier, ‘Alī Mardān was from Fath ‘Alī Shāh’s second wife, the daughter of the *mīr* (*thum* in Burushaski) of Hunza Ghazanfar Khān I (d. 1864). ‘Alī Mardān’s first wife was the daughter of the temporary Shughnī ruler of Wakhān Shāh Mīr Bek, who was ousted by Fath ‘Alī Shāh. When Shāh Mīr Bek left Wakhān he took his daughter with him. He then married the sister of the *mehtar* of Chitrāl, Amānullā Khān. His second wife was the widow of the Shughnī *mīr*, Yūsuf ‘Alī Khān, and the sister of the Sarikūl ruler Alif Bek (the son of Abu Hasan Bek). Thomas Gordon was probably the first European traveller to meet ‘Alī Mardān in 1874 while he was still the crown prince (*mīrzāda*); he is described as “a young man of about twenty-five years of age, with fair hair and blue eyes, and pleasing manners” (Gordon 1876: 129-130). There is a special section in Gordon’s report, which emphasises the *mīr*’s devotion to his faith when he was seeing off Gordon’s Great Pamir Party at the Langar-Kisht. During the farewell, ‘Alī Mardān gave Gordon “a pair of ibex-hounds”, but when Gordon asked him what he wanted in return, the *mīr* asked for a ring engraved with the following verses, which was eventually sent to him from Delhi:

*Ba fazl-i ān Khudāwand-i nigahbān,
‘Alī Mardān ghulām-i Shāh-i Mardān.*

By the grace of the Protecting Lord,
‘Alī Mardān is the servant of the King of Men [‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib]
(Gordon 1876: 152-53)

Although the *mīrs* were not generally popular among the commoners, ‘Alī Mardān seemed to be an exception as described in the reports by the aforementioned foreign travellers. He is portrayed as a just ruler, who cared about his subjects, loved dogs, and had a great passion for hunting and horseracing. Putyata (1884: 66), for instance, says that the people of Wakhān loved their ruler and that they were ready to sacrifice their lives for him. Gordon (1873: 130) emphasises the *mīr*’s love of horseracing, hunting, and dogs. Bobrinskoī (1908) also says something similar, providing some interesting details about ‘Alī Mardān and his kingdom based on the oral stories told by his interviewees. One of his interviewees, a local man called Mazhab Shāh, who served in the court of the *mīr* in Qal’ a-yi Panja, reported that the *mīr* liked sports, especially horseracing (he had about 6-7 Badakhshī horses) and hunting accompanied by his guards and dogs; he hunted on the mountain goats and sheep in the Qabal-Shikār (“the circular hunting”), a hunting venue not far from the village of Langar (Bobrinskoī

1908: 66-70). Oral stories also name a place called Shikār-shiy (“hunting rocks”) on the right bank of the Panj, near the village of Nijgar where the *mīr* used to hunt.¹³

During ‘Alī Mardān’s reign, Russia, Britain, Afghanistan, and China were all preoccupied with expanding their territorial control in the Pamirs. In 1875-76 the Russians conquered the khanate of Kokand and created the Fergana Oblast within the GGT. As Wakhān, Shughnān, and Eastern Pamir used to be nominal parts of the former Kokand khanate, the Russians automatically assumed these territories to be theirs, and by 1878 they expanded 70 miles south of Kizil-Jik in the Pamirs (Carver 1981: 110). The Chinese, after the collapse of Yā‘qub Bek’s state in 1879, reclaimed the Eastern Pamirs, which was a nominal territory of the *mīr* of Wakhān. By the early 1880s, the Chinese troops were stationed in various parts of the Pamirs, however, with the Afghan invasion of the left bank of the Western Pamir, and the Russian advances in the Eastern Pamir, the Chinese rule in the region came to an end. A Russian-Chinese treaty was signed in St. Petersburg in 1884, which basically created a wedge of no-man’s land in the Pamirs (Carver 1981: 11). During the same year Sarikūl became a part of a newly created by the Chinese Qing dynasty province of Xinjiang in Eastern Turkestan including the former kingdom (Kashgar) of Yā‘qub Bek.

On the western frontiers too the political situation was rapidly changing. In 1880, after the death of the Afghan king Sher ‘Alī Khān, his nephew, general ‘Abdurrahmān Khān emerged from his ten-year exile in Bukhara, and succeeded him (Morgan, 1981:189). Soon after his succession to the Afghan throne, ‘Abdurrahmān created a new province in the occupied territories of Badakhshan and Qataghān, appointed Sardār Abdullā Khān as its new governor, and issued a decree to abolish the semi-independent principalities of Shughnān, Zībāk and Wakhān (Straub 2013: 29-30). He also invaded Rūshān and Shughnān, which, according to the Russians, was a breach of the 1873 Anglo-Russian pact. Although the Russians tried to protest diplomatically, they could not stop the advance of the Afghan army and their political allies, the British, who believed that the left bank of the River Panj and the Sarhad valley up to the Zorkūl Lake belonged to Afghanistan. In fact, the British wanted to expand the territory of Afghanistan up to the borders of China in the east to prevent future potential Russian advances into India. This idea was first proposed in 1884 by Sir Charles Mac-Gregor, a British army general in India in *The Defence of India: A Strategical Study* (Yapp 2001:194). Later the British adopted this proposal and sent several missions to the Pamirs in order to establish the so-called “historical rights” of China and Afghanistan over the Pamirs, and collect military intelligence about the region (Postnikov: 51-66). These missions included those of William Lockhart in 1885, Ney Elias in 1885-86, Francis Younghusband in 1889, George Littledale in 1890 and some others. For instance, one of the objectives of Elias’ mission was “to clear up the ambiguities of the 1872 Agreement”, for neither the Afghans nor the British knew for sure what the so-called eastern border of Afghanistan looked like (Morgan 1981: 200-201).¹⁴ Morgan also says that Elias had a letter from the spiritual leader of the Ismailis – Aga Khan III – and therefore he was well treated in Wakhān and other Ismaili areas (1981: 204). Although Elias’ report concluded that Shughnān, Rūshān, and Darwāz are “ethnically” linked to Bukhara, “geographic arguments cannot be used to reconsider the provisional spheres of Russian and British influences agreed in 1873” (Morgan 1981: 233). Elias drew the first map of the British plans to divide the Pamirs between China and Afghanistan (Postnikov 2000: 65). Maps of the region were also sketched by other European travellers, including the Swedish geographer Sven Hedin

¹³ From an interview conducted with Mirboz Shokimov in the village of Zugvand in February 2002.

¹⁴ For Ney Elias’ report, see Elias (2008).

(1898) and the Danish geographer Ole Olufsen (1904).¹⁵ It is also equally important to acknowledge the works of so-called “trans-frontier explores” in this endeavour including Abdul Majid (1860), Mīrzā Shujā (1868-69), Havildar (1870), Faiz Bakhsh (1870), Ibrāhim Khān (1870), Munshī (1874), Mukhtār Shāh (1879-81) and Abdul *Rahim* (1889-90) (Kreutzmann 2017: 63).

The Russians, however, fall behind the British at the outset of the European discoveries of the region. Their first expeditions, led by Alexei Fedchenko (in 1871), Nikolai Severtsov (in 1876), Ivan Mushketov (in 1878) and Vasily Oshanin (in 1878) came close to, but did not cross through the Pamir districts (Curzon 1896: 239-260). The first Russian expeditions that actually reached Wakhān, Shughnān and other mountain districts were conducted by Dmitry Putyata (in 1883), Bronislav Grombchevskii (in 1889) and Colonel Mikhail Ionov, who marched through the Pamirs and established the Pamirskiy Post in 1891. Captain Putyata was an important observer and eyewitness of the 1883 events in Wakhān. Accompanied by Dmitry Ivanov and Benderskī he led the Russian Pamir expedition to Eastern Pamir (the Great Pamir), Wakhān, Sarikūl and Shughnān. The expedition reached Sarhad on 11th of August 1883 and left Panja after eight days (1884: 21-30).¹⁶ Putyata’s trip somehow resembled that of Wood in a sense that it also caused grave trouble for the ruler of Wakhān and his subjects. When the Afghans, who under the 1872-73 Anglo-Russian pact, assumed their authority over Wakhān, heard that ‘Alī Mardān Shāh allowed the Russian expedition into his territory, they invaded the region once again, terrorised its people, and forced the *mīr* and hundreds of his fellow countrymen to flee to Chitrāl, Hunza, and Sarikūl.¹⁷ It should be noted that on the eve of Putyata’s arrival in Wakhān the emir of Bukhara (a protectorate of Russia) summoned Yusuf ‘Alī Khān, the *mīr* of Shughnān, because the *mīr* had requested previously that the emir of Bukhara to take Shughnān under his jurisdiction. However, at the time his plea was rejected by the emir. Yusuf ‘Alī Khān’s plea angered the Afghans and they sent an army to Shughnān and arrested him, his family members, and 74 *aqsaqāls*, and appointed his nephew, Guhar Amān Khān, the governor of Shughnān overseen by the Afghan Muhammad Ferūz Khān.¹⁸ Later they appointed a new ruler of Shughnān who was a Pashtu from Qandahār named Gulzār Khān (Elias 2007: 58). The Afghans also summoned ‘Alī Mardān, and Sāhib, the ruler of Zībāk, to Khanabad; it is said that contrary to Yūsuf ‘Alī Khān, the *mīr* of Wakhān was well received, presented with gifts, and sent back to his country.

In Sarhad Putyata met the local *qāḍī* named Sarvar and interviewed him with the help of his translator Mīrzā ‘Azīz, who informed them that six days earlier (i.e. 5th of August 1883) ‘Alī Mardān returned from Khanabad, and that he had mended his relationship with the Afghan governor of Badakhshan and Qataghān. The *qāḍī* also claimed that ‘Alī Mardān was an independent *mīr*, who also controlled Zībāk and Ishkāshīm (Putyata 1884: 17). Putyata admits that he hid his identity as a scholar-traveller and sent a letter to ‘Alī Mardān via *qāḍī* Sarvar asking the *mīr* to assist his expedition in traveling through Yārkhun to Chitrāl. The *mīr* then invited Putyata and his group to his residence in Qal’-a-yi Panja, while he assembled an urgent meeting with the local *aqsaqāls* to discuss the Afghan invasion. However, ‘Alī Mardān’s invitation to Putyata was cancelled because the Afghans (informed by their

15 There are a number of maps by other and local explorers that were published on the topic, see their reproductions in Kreutzmann (2015 and 2017).

16 Captain Dimitri Putyata (1855-1915) was accompanied by Dimitri Ivanov (a mountain engineer), Nikolay Benderskī (a topographer), 20 cavalry of Kazaks and 8 local people. The findings of the expedition were published in “Ocherki ekspeditsii G.S. Kap. Putyata v Pamir, Sarikol, Wakhan i Shugnan 1883 g.” in *Sbornik geographicheskikh, topograficheskikh i statisticheskikh materialov po aziī, vip. 10*. St. Petersburg: Voennay tipografiya. 1884.

17 The head of the Osh *uezd* (district) of the Fergana oblast of the GGT also confirms this point after receiving a letter from Putyata. *IHK*, 1: 9.

18 *IHK*, Doc. 1, “Letter to the Head of Asian Department of the Russian Imperial Council in Kashgar” dated 12 September 1883, No. 98, p. 9. To note, the events of 1883 also forced the most influential religious leader of the Ismailis of Badakhshan, the *pīr* of Zībāk Shāh Abdurrahīm, the son of Shāh Yāqut Shāh, to flee to Chitrāl (Straub 2013: 22, 33).

agent in Panja, someone called Mujir) became aware of the meeting and threatened the *mīr* not to help the Russians. ‘Alī Mardān’s adviser Qudrat Shāh, who brought the *mīr*’s letter to Putyata, informed the Russians that, “the Wakhīs are abandoning their homes, the Khān [Putyata refers to the *mīr* as Khān] escaped from Qal’ a-yi Panja this night [14 to 15 of August]; few hours ago he passed by our camp, but did not want to disturb us. ‘Alī Mardān is very keen to meet the head of the expedition to seek his advice regarding his aspiration to seek refuge in Russia,” (1884: 26). Putyata set off to meet the *mīr* in Qal’ a-yi Vust. On his way he observed people in chaos and despair leaving their homes and livestock, fleeing towards Chitrāl and Hunza. When Putyata asked a Wakhī man why they are leaving their homes, he received the following answer:

“The Russian came [to our country] and that is why the Afghans wanted to kill our Khān. The Khān has escaped, so we will follow him and will not let him down ... There is no life with the stubborn Afghans, who enslave our people and force us to build roads in Badakhshan. They take away of our work force, and it affects our own businesses. They rape our wives. An Afghan can come to any local’s house in the absence of the husband and leave his boots outside. If the husband enters the house, he would be bitten. So, why should one enter the house, if one sees a pair of Afghan boots outside it? While the Khān was in charge he protected us, but now when he has left they treat us like slaves,” (Putyata 1884: 26-27).

On 15th of August 1883 Putyata had finally met with ‘Alī Mardān in Qal’ a-yi Vust. Like his subjects, the *mīr* too complained about the invaders: “The Afghans robbed me, they took everything; they would have taken my wife, if I had not decide to flee,” (1884: 28). Putyata does not go into the details of his conversation with the *mīr*, neither does he respond to ‘Alī Mardān’s request of letting him to enter the Russian occupied territories in Central Asia. He only indicates that the *mīr* had no choice except leaving his mirdom. Other sources too mention this event. For instance, Bobrinskoī (1908: 42) asserts that ‘Alī Mardān left his kingdom and was accompanied by his family members, including his brother Nasriddīn Shāh (Dumak) and Sarbuland ‘Alī Shāh, and approximately sixty to hundred household of followers. His family members fled to Kunjut (Hunza), but he himself first went to visit Abu Hassan, the ruler of Tāshqurghān (Sarikūl), and from there made another plea to the Russians to allow him to enter their occupied territories. However, the Russians were not so keen in helping him out. One of reasons for this refusal could be related to the Russia’s state of presence in the region. Until after the 1895 Anglo-Russian demarcation, the Russian position in the Great Pamir, Wakhān and Shughnān on the right bank of the Panj River was very weak. In fact, they were not military present in these Tajik districts. Only after the 1889 British expedition to the Pamirs, led by Francis Younghusband, Russia increased its activities in the Pamirs (Kaushik 1976: 242). The first Russian military base – “Pamirskiy Post” (known as *Shāh Jān* at the outset) was established in 1891 by Colonel Mikhail Ionov in what is today’s Murghāb town in Tajik Badakhshan.¹⁹

After ‘Alī Mardān’s departure the Afghan invaders instituted the colonial office of *hākīm* (governor) in Wakhān, Zībāk, Ishkāshīm, and Shughnān-Rūshān. All the *hākīms*, some of whom were from among the local collaborators, were appointed by Abdurrahman Khān or his chief governor of the Qataghān-Badakhshan province. In Wakhān a Kyrgyz man called Ghaffār Khān, became the *hākīm*, appointed by ‘Abdurrahmān Khān’s decree (Straub 2013: 33). In 1888-89 Badakhshan was occupied by series

¹⁹ For organisational structure of the Pamir Post, see *IHK*, 29: 257.

of revolts against the new Afghan regime well described in *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh* by Fayz Muḥammad Kātīb Hazārah, who writes that the revolts were fuelled in part by the Russians and ‘Abdurrahmān’s cousin Ishāq Khān, the viceroy of Northern Afghanistan, who was leading the uprisings.²⁰ The sons of the *mīrs* of Qataghān and Badakhshan also took part in the revolt (Hazārah 1952: 620). The deposed *mīr* of Wakhān ‘Alī Mardān crossed from the right bank of the Panj with a small group of his followers including troops of cavalry and infantry. The British agent in Gilgit, Algernon Durand, reported that Ishāq Khān summoned ‘Alī Mardān from his exile and reinstated him as the *mīr* of Wakhān (Durand 1899: 78). This fact is confirmed by ‘Alī Mardān himself in his letter to the Russian traveller and special agent in the Fergana office of the GGT, Bronisal Grombchevskii (d. 1926), who in 1888 travelled through the Wakhān-Daryā to Hunza. In early October 1888 Grombchevskii received a letter from the *mīr*, where he informed him that the Afghans had fled and that he was “reinstated on the throne of his forefathers” (Grombchevskii 2008: 270-71). However, this time too, the Russian refused to support the *mīr*. ‘Alī Mardān was soon challenged by the *mīr* of the Ishtragh Sada, Āshūr Khān Wakhī, who was collaborating with the Afghans. Supported by the militia of Nazar Muhammad Khān, Āshūr forced the *mīr* and his brother Sarbuland ‘Alī Shāh to flee to Chitrāl (McChesney and Khorrami 2013: 485). In Chitrāl they were well received by the *mīr*’s brother-in-law, *mehtar* Amān ul-Mulk. The British first attempted to create a protectorate called “Sad-i Sarhad”, including the Great and Little Pamirs under ‘Alī Mardān’s rule, but they failed (Straub 2013: 57). Later, they supported him to become the governor of the Ishkāman valley (in modern Gilgit-Baltistan province of Pakistan) stationed in the village of Yimit, where he served as a governor until his death in 1926 (Chohan 1998: 215). Ishkāman became a new home for the Wakhī refugees, who by 1906, constituted 37% of the total population of the valley (Kreutzmann 2005: 13). Grombchevskii confirms that ‘Alī Mardān left the Wakhān to Ishkāman, and that the Afghans had stationed 200 infantry troops and same number of cavalry troops in Qal’a-yi Panja as well as 25 troops in the Langar Post on the right Bank of the Panj River, which was ruled by the Afghan, Muhammad Raḥīm Karneyl (IHK, Doc. 7: 39-40). Grombchevskii also reports about the brutality of the Afghan occupation, for instance, in 1888 while traveling from Qarātegin to Altin Mazār and from there to the Sarīz village (turned into a lake after the 1911 earthquake). He wrote:

“On the road we met fleeing Shughnānīs, who told us that the occupation of Shughnān [by the Afghans] was accompanied by a terrible brutality. The entire population, who could carry guns were slaughtered, girls and young women were raped, and children of the influential people were sent to Kabul. People run towards Chinese territories to find refuge among their Sarikūl tribesmates, but the Chinese led by Jan-Darin mercilessly pushed them back towards Shughnān, where they were caught and executed by the Afghans. The refugees were in panic. They moved towards Murgab leaving behind the sick people, children, animals and house belongings...” (IHK 7: 37-38).

Terrified by the Afghan raids and brutality, many Wakhīs left Wakhān for Chitrāl, Hunza and Sarikūl. In the occupied Wakhān, the Afghan governor of Qataghān and Badakhshan, Shazāda Hasan, appointed Āshūr Khān as the viceroy (*nā’ib*). According to *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh*, Nā’ib Āshūr (d. 1895) and his sons, La’l Bek and Ismā’īl Khān, actively collaborated with the Afghans. In the summer of 1889 he and some Wakhī *arbābs* (nobles), including Qāzī Ghulāmnabī, Mubārak Shāh, Ghulām Haydar, Amān Bek, Tilā Bek, Tamāshā and Mazhab Shāh, were invited by the Afghans to Fayzābād

20 For the English translation of three volumes of the *Sirāj al-Tawārīkh*, see McChesney and Khorrami (2013).

and given *khil'ats* (ceremonial robes) and sent back to Wakhān (McChensney and Khorrami 2013: 521). Regardless of such receptions to the locals, the Afghans favoured their own Pashtun tribesmen over the Tajiks and appointed them to the key civic and military positions in Badakhshan, Wakhān and other occupied mirdoms (Straub 2013: 35).

The territorial dispute between Afghanistan and Russia along the Panj River continued until the final demarcation in 1895, when Russia and Britain finally settled their long dispute over the control of the Badakhshan and its Pamirian principalities. They divided their spheres of influence to the east of Zorkūl (Lake Victoria) to Orta-Beg Passes (Benderskī) towards Kizil Rabāt on the Aksu River and down through the River Panj (Ewans 2008: 252-254). This pact also obliged the Afghans to withdraw their troops from the right bank of the Panj River, and the Bukharan troops had to leave the left bank of Darwāz, and take control of the right banks of Darwāz, Shughnān, Rūshān, Ghārān, Ishkāshīm and Wakhān. The River Panj became the demarcation line between the new Afghan and Russian occupied territories. Hence, Wakhān, Ghārān, Shughnān, Rūshān and Darwāz were divided alongside the river between Afghanistan (the left bank) and the Bukharan emirate (the right bank), a protectorate of Russia.

Tsarist Russia, acting against the will of the locals, who begged the Russians to take them under their protection due to the Afghan oppression, gave the newly occupied territories to the Sunni Manghit rulers of Bukhara, who like the Afghans, had sectarian animosity towards the Shi'is. Ironically though, even the emir of Bukhara Abdul Aḥad Khān (r. 1885-1910), was not keen to take on the Shi'i Ismaili districts complaining about their sect, remoteness, bad infrastructure, and lack of material profit for the emir.²¹ Nevertheless, the emir's envoys and administrators in the Pamirs tried to benefit from these impoverished regions as much as they could. Guided by their sectarian prejudices, they harassed the locals by imposing Sunni Sharia law and heavy taxation upon them, and fostered opium addiction (Shokhumorov 2008: 65-69). Many young girls and boys were taken away from their parents and sold in Afghan towns. It is reported that young girls were forced to marry Afghan and Bukharan officers and administrators, whereas the boys were sexually abused. Even the sons and daughters of the influential locals were not safe from harassment. For instance, the Secretary of the Russian Political Agency in Bukhara (*Politagnestvo*) Baron Cherkasov reported that in 1903 the troops of the Bukharan *bek* (governor) of Pamir Mīrzā Yuldāsh, while collecting tax in the Zung village of Wakhān, wanted to enslave and abuse the son of the respected local religious leader (*pīr*), but their attempts failed due to a strong resistance from the locals (IHK 27: 207). This incident caused a huge public outcry and civil unrest, which made the Bukharans flee from Wakhān and later from other Ismaili regions for good (IHK 236). The Russians had eventually responded to the pleas of local religious and political leaders of Wakhān, Shughnān and others regions to subsume Pamir into the Russian empire (IHK 23, 24). The Western Pamir, as the Russians called it, on the right bank of the Panj fell under the jurisdiction of the GGT starting from the early twentieth century. The local witness Mullā Nazar Shāh (1819-1910), whose picture was taken by Andreev and Polovtsov (1911:41, picture VI) in 1902 in the village of Rin on the right bank of the Panj, poetically summarizes the coming of the Russians and the escape of the Bukharans from Wakhān:²²

21 Emir's concerns about his new Ismaili territories are raised in a letter, which he sent to the GGT on 24.07.1901. *IHK* 21:152-153.

22 For more details on Mullā Nazar Shāh, see Mirzo (2010: 139) and Qurbonshoev (2009: 187).

*Fasli bahār bigzasht, āmad fasli tamūs,
Āmad sadāyi tum-tumi āvāzayi urus,
Hākīm nayāft fursati pushidani chamus,
Bichāra pāhbarhana khalāsī nayāft az urus.*

Spring has gone and summer has arrived,
The Russians are coming, their trots are loudly heard.
The governor did not have chance to wear his boots,
The poor barefoot could not escape from the Russians.²³

Conclusion

On the eve of the Anglo-Russian rivalry in Central Asia in the late nineteenth century, Wakhān was under the political influence of Badakhshan, a tributary of Qunduz, on the west and the Kokand khanate on the east. With the advent of the Russians and the British, the political landscape of the Wakhān had dramatically changed. These superpowers, aiming to expand and demarcate their spheres of influence throughout Central and South Asia, used Afghanistan (the British), China (the British) and the emirate of Bukhara (the Russians) to claim their so-called historical rights over Badakhshan and the Pamir mirdoms, which had previously enjoyed a sort of independence (Badakhshan) or semi-independence (Wakhān, Shughnān and Darwāz). At the outset of their rivalry neither the Russians nor the British had a clear understanding about the peoples, geography and cultures of the Pamir principalities. Their ambitions were driven purely by their geopolitical goals to expand their spheres of influence in both political and economic terms. In a short period of time, the British and Russian explorers and spies managed to collect sufficient information about the people and geography of these regions and drew first topographic maps, which aimed to support their territorial claims to bolster their sides in the disputes.

In these disputes, Wakhān was a crucial point, mainly due to its geographic location. It bordered the new British imperial territories to the southeast, Russian colonial territories in Turkestan to the north, the Chinese protectorates in the east, and the occupied territories by the Afghans in Badakhshan to the west. Wakhān served as a corridor between these regions. Moreover, the vast territory of the Great and Little Pamirs with their minerals and water resources belonged to the Wakhī rulers, who strived to preserve their power by either pleasing or at times, confronting their powerful neighbours such as when two of the Uzbek rulers of Badakhshan were killed while raiding Wakhān.

Rahīm Bek, Fath ‘Alī Shāh and ‘Alī Mardān Shāh, the three most important rulers of Wakhān in the nineteenth century, tried to deploy their limited diplomatic and military capacity to save the mirdom. Rahīm Bek was a strong leader, who sacrificed his own life defending his political stands. On the contrary, his brother Fath ‘Alī Shāh, also a strong *mīr*, was more of a diplomat, who always sought to establish contact with the rulers of the neighbouring powers in order to prevent his mirdom from subjugation. Under his command the Wakhī army participated in the 1865 battle of Kanarik to help Yā‘qub Bek of Kashgar in his fight against the Chinese. However, the “Great Game” of the world’s superpowers was already on and the fate of the kingdoms of Central and South Asia regardless of their size and might was predetermined by the goals of that game. The bigger kingdoms like the

23 All the Persian and Russian translations in this article are by the author (Iloliev), unless otherwise stated.

emirate of Bukhara and Afghanistan were chosen to rule the smaller mirdoms such as Badakhshan, Wakhān and Shughnān. The 1873 Granville-Gorchakov pact put an end to the semi-independence of Wakhān and Badakhshan by giving them to Afghanistan, but both sides of the Wakhān remained intact until 1895. ‘Alī Mardān – the last ruler of Wakhān strived to save his mirdom and its population from religious and political persecutions imposed by the Afghans. After the 1883 Afghan invasion, he made several attempts to re-establish his mirdom, however, the balance of power in the region was not in his favour. During the 1888-89 revolts in Badakhshan he came back from exile and joined the rebels fighting against the Afghan invaders, but was betrayed by local Afghan collaborators, and denied support by the Russians. One may assume that if Russian had helped him, at least the unity of Wakhān would have been preserved. However, as for ‘Alī Mardān’s own life and security, ironically, the Russians did a favour by not letting him into their territories in Central Asia; for later when the Bolsheviks took over Tsarist Russia, they exterminated, or sent to Siberian concentration camps, almost all elements of what they believed “feudalism” including the former political and religious elite.

The 1895 Anglo-Russian agreement divided Wakhān between Afghanistan and the Bukhara Emirate. This was followed by a dark era of ethnic and religious persecutions by the Afghan and Bukharan authorities, displacement of the Wakhī people and depopulation of their historical land, and the emergence of new migrant communities in China (the Xinjiang province) and British India (the Gilgit-Baltistan province of today’s Pakistan). It cost enormous challenges for the people of Wakhān. While the left bank of the Panj River and the Sarhad valley fell permanently under the Afghan administration, the right bank has gone through several political transformations since the 1895 division. It endured Bukharan oppression, and enjoyed some freedom under Tsarist Russia, and made enormous progresses during Soviet rule in terms of education, social equality, health service and infrastructure.

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