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THE IMAGE OF THE KAZAKH STEPPE IN ANNETTE MEAKIN'S *"A RIBBON OF IRON"* (1901)

Abstract

This article examines the representation of the Kazakh steppe in Annette M. B. Meakin's travelogue *"A Ribbon of Iron"* (1901), one of the earliest English female-authored accounts of Siberia at the turn of the twentieth century. Situating Meakin's narrative in the political context of the Boxer Rebellion and the Blagoveshchensk massacre, the study analyses how her descriptions of Omsk and its surroundings construct the Kazakh steppe as an imperial periphery. Particular attention is paid to Meakin's ethnographic sketches of the Kazakhs, whom she calls "Kirgiz," and to the ways in which their everyday practices – yurts, kumys, horsemanship, clothing – are aestheticised and framed within orientalist categories. The article also highlights the role of mediating figures – Jewish residents, German settlers, Russian officials – in shaping her access to Kazakh life. By reading Meakin's text through imagological and postcolonial approaches, the study argues that European travel writing inscribed Siberia into Western discourse as a multiethnic contact zone marked by hierarchy, ambivalence, and imperial tension.

Keywords: Annette Meakin, A Ribbon of Iron, Kazakh steppe, Siberia, travel writing, orientalism, interethnic relations

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АННЕТТ МИКИННІҢ “A RIBBON OF IRON” (1901) ЕҢБЕГІНДЕГІ ҚАЗАҚ ДАЛАСЫНЫҢ БЕЙНЕСІ

Аңдатпа

Бұл мақалада Аннетт М.Б. Микиннің *“A Ribbon of Iron”* (1901) атты травелогындағы қазақ даласының репрезентациясы қарастырылады. Бұл еңбек XX ғасырдың басындағы Сібір туралы ағылшын әйел авторларының алғашқы еңбектерінің қатарынан орын алады. Зерттеу Микиннің баяндауын Ихэтуань көтерілісі мен Благовещенскідегі қырғын сияқты саяси оқиғалар контексінде қарастырады және оның Омбы мен маңайын сипаттауы қазақ даласын империялық шеткері аймақ ретінде қалай бейнелегенін талдайды. Ерекше назар Микин «қырғыздар» деп атаған қазақтардың этнографиялық сипаттамаларына аударылады: киіз үйлер, қымыз, атқа міну мәдениеті, киім үлгілері – барлығы ориенталистік категорияларда эстетикалық тұрғыда әсемделіп көрсетіледі. Сондай-ақ мақалада делдал тұлғалардың – еврей тұрғындарының, неміс қоныстанушыларының, орыс шенеуніктерінің – қазақ өміріне жол ашудағы рөлі айқындалады. Имагологиялық және постколониялық тәсілдерді қолдана отырып, зерттеу еуропалық травелогтар Сібірді иерархия, екіұштылық және империялық шиеленіс белгілеген көпэтносты «байланыс аймағы» ретінде Батыс дискурсына енгізгенін дәлелдейді.

Түйін сөздер: Аннетт Микин, A Ribbon of Iron, қазақ даласы, Сібір, травелог, ориентализм, этносаралық қатынастар

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ОБРАЗ КАЗАХСКОЙ СТЕПИ В ТРАВЕЛОГЕ АННЕТТ МИКИН “A RIBBON OF IRON” (1901)

Аннотация

Статья посвящена репрезентации казахской степи в травелоге Аннетт М.Б. Микин *“A Ribbon of Iron”* (1901), одном из первых англоязычных женских описаний Сибири рубежа XIX-XX вв. Рассматривая повествование А. Микин в политическом контексте Ихэтуаньского восстания и Благовещенского погрома, автор статьи анализирует, как в её описании Омска и его окрестностей конструируется образ казахской степи как имперской периферии. Особое внимание уделяется этнографическим зарисовкам Микин о «киргизах» – их быте, юртам, кумысу, коневодству, одежде, которые эстетизируются и вписываются в ориенталистские категории. Отдельно рассматривается роль посредников – еврейских жителей, немецких колонистов, русских чиновников, – определявших её доступ к казахской жизни. В оптике имагологии и постколониальных исследований показано, что европейские травелоги вписывали Сибирь в западный дискурс как многоэтничную «зону контакта», отмеченную иерархией, амбивалентностью и напряжённостью имперских взаимодействий.

Ключевые слова: Аннетт Микин, A Ribbon of Iron, казахская степь, Сибирь, травелог, ориентализм, межнациональные отношения

Introduction. At the turn of the twentieth century, Siberia occupied a paradoxical place in the imagination of European travellers. On the one hand, it was perceived as a land of exile, hardship, and imperial violence; on the other, as a space of cultural diversity, where multiple ethnic groups coexisted under Russian rule. This multiethnic composition – Tatars, Kazakhs, Jews, Germans, and other communities – made Siberia not only a geographic frontier but also a laboratory of interethnic contact. For European observers, travel across Siberia thus became an encounter with the imperial periphery as a site where ethnic diversity and imperial authority intersected in complex ways.

Among the voices that documented this world was Annette M. B. Meakin (1867-1959), a British traveller and writer who journeyed across Russia and Siberia in 1900 with her mother, publishing her impressions in *"A Ribbon of Iron"* (1901) [1]. Meakin was among the first European women to travel along the newly constructed Trans-Siberian Railway, undertaking the journey, as she herself emphasized in her book, after being inspired by the presentation of the railway at the Exposition Universelle of 1900. She relied on the *Guide to the Great Siberian Railway* prepared under the editorship of A.I. Dmitriev-Mamonov and A.F. Zdziarski, translated into English by Miss L. Kukol-Yasnopolsky and revised by John Marshall, which had been issued precisely for the purpose of promoting the line to an international audience [2]. Many other travellers followed this model of combining personal impressions with official materials – among them the American Michael M. Shoemaker, who undertook a Trans-Siberian voyage two years later and published his account in *The Great Siberian Railway from St. Petersburg to Pekin* (1903) [3].

Her intellectual background was equally remarkable: between 1897 and 1900 she attended Latin classes at University College London under the distinguished classicist A.E. Housman. In his reference letter, Housman praised her "intelligence", "enthusiasm", and unusual zeal for Latin composition, including verse – qualities that he "had seldom known" among his students [4, 30]. Although she did not complete a degree, Housman's testimony illustrates her scholarly discipline and literary ambition, which later shaped the precision and attentiveness of her travel writing. She went on to publish two further volumes on Russia and its borderlands – *In Russian Turkestan: A Garden of Asia* (1903) and *Russia: Travels and Studies* (1906) – which together with *"A Ribbon of Iron"* form a coherent corpus of her travel writing on the Russian Empire.

Despite its originality, *"A Ribbon of Iron"* has remained virtually unexplored in scholarship. Apart from scattered mentions in works on English and American travelogues about Siberia [5], women's travel writing in Russia [6], anthologies of Trans-Siberian narratives [7], or broader discussions of railway imaginaries [8], Meakin's travelogue has never been the subject of a comprehensive study. Her Siberian journey, in particular, is still waiting for close academic attention. A somewhat greater degree of recognition has been given to her writings on Central Asia, yet even those have not been systematically analysed or fully translated into Russian or into the languages of the region. This lacuna underscores the significance of revisiting A Ribbon of Iron as a unique source for understanding how European travellers perceived interethnic relations on the imperial frontier.

What distinguishes Meakin's account is precisely this mediated perception of the Kazakh steppe. Her encounters with Kazakh communities are filtered through Jewish guides, German settlers, and Russian officials, reflecting the multi-layered structure of contact in Siberia. At the same time, her descriptions reproduce orientalist and imperial frames: Kazakhs are presented as hospitable and "best-natured," yet accused of horse theft; their yurts and kumys are carefully described but framed in terms of primitiveness or exotic spectacle. The Kazakh steppe thus becomes a cultural frontier, legible only through the combined lenses of empire and orientalism.

The aim of this article is to analyse how Annette Meakin's *"A Ribbon of Iron"* represents the Kazakh steppe and its inhabitants within the broader context of interethnic relations in Siberia as perceived by European travellers at the fin de siècle. Drawing on imagological and postcolonial approaches, I argue that Meakin's narrative exemplifies the ways in which European travel writing constructed Siberia as both an imperial periphery and a multiethnic contact zone. By examining her depictions of Kazakhs and the mediating roles of other communities, this article contributes to our

understanding of how Siberia's ethnic diversity was inscribed into Western discourses of empire, otherness, and borderlands.

Methods and materials. The primary material for this study is Annette M.B. Meakin's *"A Ribbon of Iron"*, a travelogue based on her journey along the newly constructed Trans-Siberian Railway. Particular attention is paid to the *Preface*, which situates the narrative in the political context of 1900, and to Chapter III (*Omsk–A Visit to the Kirgiz*), where Meakin offers her most detailed account of Kazakh life and of the multiethnic environment of Omsk and its surroundings.

The text is considered not in isolation but as part of a wider **corpus of European travel writing about Siberia** at the turn of the twentieth century (e.g., Michael Shoemaker, Ella Christie, John Fraser, Francis Clark, Henry Norman, Bassett Digby and Richardson Wright). Within this corpus, Meakin's account is distinctive for its female authorship and for its particular focus on everyday practices and interethnic encounters.

The study also builds on scholarship in the history and ethnography of the Kazakhs under Russian rule. Martha Olcott's *The Kazakhs* (1986) [9] provides a broad overview of Kazakh social and political transformation; Virginia Martin's *Law and Custom in the Steppe* (2001) [10] examines the legal pluralism of Kazakh society in the nineteenth century; Steven Sabol's *Russian Colonization and the Genesis of Kazak National Consciousness* (2003) [11] analyses the colonial dynamics that shaped identity. These works help to situate Meakin's ethnographic sketches – yurts, kumys, horsemanship, and Islamic practices – within the broader context of Kazakh life under empire.

For the imperial and postcolonial framework, the article uses studies on the Russian steppe frontier and Central Asian conquest: Michael Khodarkovsky's *Russia's Steppe Frontier* (2002) [12], Willard Sunderland's *Taming the Wild Field* (2004) [13], and Alexander Morrison's *The Russian Conquest of Central Asia* (2020) [14]. These works conceptualise the steppe not simply as geography but as a frontier – a space of asymmetrical encounters and a laboratory of empire.

The religious and interethnic dimensions of Meakin's narrative are interpreted through Robert D. Crews's *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (2006) [15] and Adeeb Khalid's *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform* (1998) [16], which show how Islam shaped interethnic interactions in the imperial borderlands. Urban contact zones are further illuminated by the collective volume *Everyday Life in Central Asia* (2007) [17], both of which highlight the role of mediating figures – settlers, officials, and minority groups – in structuring access to local populations.

Finally, the study engages with broader discussions of Russian orientalism (Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, 2010, Pavel Alekseev, 2020) [18; 19], in order to show how Meakin's narrative simultaneously reproduces imperial categories and contributes to the orientalist imagery of the Kazakh steppe in Western discourse.

The study proceeds through close reading of Meakin's narrative, with emphasis on descriptive strategies, metaphors, and characterisation of ethnic groups. At the same time, it situates the text within the broader European discourse on Siberia, thereby allowing us to see how Meakin's representation of the Kazakhs contributes to the construction of Siberia as both an imperial periphery and a multiethnic contact zone.

Results and Discussion

1. Political Context and the Framing of the Periphery. Annette Meakin begins her narrative with a strikingly political Preface, which recalls the events in Blagoveshchensk in July 1900. As she notes, "*within twenty days of our visit to Blagovestchensk, that town was the scene of a massacre, the descriptions of which were received with horror throughout the civilized world*" [1, 5]. Although she and her mother departed shortly before the killings, her retrospective commentary anchors the travelogue in the wider upheavals of the Boxer (Ihetuan) Rebellion. This starting point is not incidental: it situates Siberia within a geography of imperial crisis, where the Russian Far East, Manchuria, and the steppe were bound together by military mobilization and interethnic violence. Later historiography confirms that Meakin's sense of shock was well founded.

The Preface reveals how precarious the balance of power on the Amur frontier appeared to a European observer. Meakin emphasises the vulnerability of Blagoveshchensk, abandoned by most of its troops who were sent across the border: "*only one reserve battalion and one battery were left to guard the town*" [1, 5]. The city's Chinese population, far outnumbering the Russians, is described as a potential threat, while the Cossacks who carried out the expulsions are characterised as "*little better than savages*" [1, 7]. The massacre itself – "*the river was black with dead bodies for weeks afterwards*" [1, 7] – becomes emblematic of the brutality of borderland encounters. Archival reconstructions confirm that such brutality combined racial animosity with material interest: peasant militias and townspeople not only expelled and killed Chinese and Manchus, but also seized their lands, shops, and even the bricks of abandoned factories [20, 218-219]. In this light, Meakin's preface captures not only the horror of an atrocity but also the structural insecurities and rivalries that defined the Amur frontier at the *fin de siècle*.

From the standpoint of European reception, this passage is significant for two reasons. First, it frames the Russian Empire not as a stable civilising force but as a power locked in violent confrontation with its neighbours and with the ethnic minorities under its rule. The juxtaposition of Russian military weakness, Cossack cruelty, and Chinese victimhood creates a picture of instability that prefigures the rest of the narrative. Second, the massacre is narrated through the lens of "eyewitnesses," which gives the travelogue an aura of documentary authority. For Meakin's British readers, the episode would have underscored the volatility of Russia's Asian frontier and the dangers inherent in its multiethnic composition.

In the context of interethnic relations, the *Preface* demonstrates how European travellers perceived Siberia as part of a continuum of contested spaces stretching from the Kazakh steppe to Manchuria. The Chinese, the Cossacks, and the Russian military emerge as actors in a violent drama, but the implications reach further: the scene preconditions the reader to interpret subsequent encounters with other non-Russian groups, including the Kazakhs, within a framework of danger, subordination, and imperial fragility. The narrative thus inscribes the Kazakh steppe into a geography of borderland unrest, where ethnic diversity is not neutral background but a source of tension and anxiety.

2. Omsk as a Multiethnic Frontier. Arriving in Omsk, Meakin immediately confronts the dual nature of the city: a space of imperial administration and modernisation, yet also a frontier settlement where multiple ethnic groups coexist uneasily. Her first impressions are ambivalent. By night the landscape appears bleak – "*the only buildings in sight looked like barns and cattle sheds*" [1, 33] – temporary shelters for migrants moving eastward. But this unpromising picture quickly gives way to acts of hospitality: a Jewish resident assists the travellers, ensuring their comfort and later facilitating their excursion into the steppe. This figure, described with warmth and sympathy, identifies himself emphatically: "*I am a Jew*" [1, 34]. The episode foregrounds both the presence of Jewish life in Omsk and its ambiguous social status – Meakin later notes that Jews were "*not admitted into society here*" [1, 35]. The contrast between exclusion and individual kindness becomes a microcosm of Siberian interethnic realities.

Equally prominent are German settlers, represented by the Lutheran pastor and his wife, who instruct Meakin on local customs. The pastor's wife explains the economic use of camels among the Kazakhs, noting that "*intelligent people do not mount camels… they are beasts of burden*" [1, 37]. Here, ethnographic knowledge about the steppe is filtered through a German intermediary, who positions herself as both insider to the local environment and representative of European rationality. Germans in Siberia, long integrated as colonists and administrators, thus appear as authoritative voices mediating between empire and nomadic populations.

The Russian imperial frame is equally present. Omsk's identity as a fortress town is recalled in terms that emphasise its military origins: "*built to instil awe into the hearts of the neighbouring Kirgiz and all other Asiatics who might prove troublesome*" [1, 36]. This historical memory inscribes the city into a geography of domination, where the Kazakh steppe is cast as a source of

recurrent threat. At the same time, Meakin is attentive to signs of modernisation: cadet schools, gymnasia for boys and girls, government efforts to beautify streets and plant trees. These features allow her to reassure her readers that Omsk is "not yet outside the pale of civilization" [1, 38].

Religious plurality further underscores the city's multiethnic character. A Tatar mosque stands so prominently that Meakin initially mistakes it for a Russian church, only realising her error when she hears the muezzin's call to prayer: "*Then, too, I noticed the golden crescent glittering in the sunlight above the 'Mullah's' head*" [1, 40]. She observes that "*the Kirgiz, who are Mohammedans, also come to the mosque. They, like the Tatars, belong to the Turki race, and speak a Turkish dialect*" [1, 41]. This brief ethnographic aside situates Kazakhs within the Islamic landscape of Siberia, linked to Tatars through religion and language, while remaining distinct in their nomadic lifestyle.

Thus, Omsk in Meakin's account appears not merely as a Russian stronghold but as a **multiethnic contact zone** where Jews, Germans, Tatars, Kazakhs, and Russians intersect. Each group is ascribed a role within the imperial hierarchy: Jews as industrious but socially marginal; Germans as carriers of knowledge and culture; Tatars and Kazakhs as representatives of Islam and the steppe; Russians as administrators and modernisers. For Meakin's readers, this tableau of coexisting yet stratified communities would have exemplified the complexity of interethnic relations in Siberia at the fin de siècle, reinforcing the perception of the region as a frontier space of cultural diversity and imperial tension.

3. Ethnographic Portrait of the Kazakhs within the Multiethnic Frontier. When Annette Meakin travels outside Omsk into the surrounding steppe, her attention turns to the Kazakhs, whom she consistently calls "Kirgiz," following the Russian imperial terminology of the time. Her description of their material culture and everyday life provides one of the earliest English female-authored portrayals of this community. Yet this ethnographic detail is never neutral: it is framed by categories that reflect both Russian colonial discourse and the expectations of a European readership.

The *yurt* is at the centre of her depiction. Meakin likens it to "*the shape of our beehives, with a round hole in the centre, which serves both as a chimney and an air hole*" [1, 44]. The metaphor of the beehive domesticates the unfamiliar for her British audience, while simultaneously evoking simplicity and primitivism. By converting the cost of yurts into pounds sterling – "*£5… whilst one of the richer class… will sometimes cost £15*" [1, 45]– she renders the nomadic economy intelligible in European terms. This strategy exemplifies how European travellers mediated cultural otherness through their own frames of reference, translating local realities into familiar categories while reinforcing perceptions of difference.

Her observations on food and household practices follow a similar pattern. Kumys, made from mares' milk, is described not only as a local staple but as a commodity circulating between Kazakhs and Russians: "*Russians buy it from them and drink it as a tonic in spring time*" [1, 47]. This detail illustrates the economic interdependence between nomads and settlers, but it is framed through a language of exotic curiosity. Cooking practices are depicted in terms that border on the grotesque: an outdoor oven is at first mistaken for "*a freshly dug child's grave*" [1, 47]. Such comparisons, striking for their morbid imagery, cast everyday practices as primitive and strange, thereby reinforcing a sense of cultural distance.

When turning to character, Meakin reproduces a familiar ambivalence: "*The Kirgiz are acknowledged by all who come in contact with them to be the best-natured people on the face of the earth. The only sin of which I have heard them accused is horse stealing*" [1, 45]. This juxtaposition of hospitality with criminality is emblematic of orientalist discourse, where the "noble" qualities of indigenous groups are consistently shadowed by accusations of backwardness or immorality. For Meakin's British audience, such portrayals confirmed both the attractiveness and the untrustworthiness of nomadic peoples.

Horsemanship, central to Kazakh identity, is aestheticised in terms that underline vitality and wildness. Kazakh horses "*fly like the wind, and are restrained with difficulty*" and can endure "*ten hours without food*" [1, 45]. By repeating anecdotes of governors struggling to control these animals, Meakin extends the metaphor of untamed energy to the people themselves, situating the Kazakhs as figures of exotic vigour on the imperial margins.

Gendered aspects reinforce the exotic frame. Women's attire is described as "*a strange white linen covering the greater part of the face, with openings for eyes, nose and mouth*" [1, 46]. This detail situates Kazakh women within an orientalist repertoire of veiling and concealment, highlighting their alterity rather than individuality. Musical instruments – "*a roughly made and very primitive guitar*" [1, 46] – are interpreted as cultural curiosities rather than as markers of a sophisticated oral tradition.

Read in the context of interethnic relations, Meakin's portrait of the Kazakhs is less an isolated ethnographic sketch than part of a broader tableau of the Siberian frontier. The Kazakhs appear as indispensable economic partners of Russians (producers of kumys, suppliers of horses) and as part of the Islamic landscape shared with Tatars, yet simultaneously as a people framed by stereotypes of primitivism and criminality. Their image emerges at the intersection of admiration and condescension, integration and exclusion.

4. Orientalist Frames and Imperial Optics. Meakin's portrayal of the Kazakhs is embedded in a set of orientalist and imperial optics that structured how European travellers approached the Russian periphery at the turn of the twentieth century. Her account constantly negotiates between two poles: fascination with the exotic and reassurance of imperial authority. This ambivalence is precisely what renders her text valuable for understanding the European reception of Siberian interethnic relations.

The memory of Omsk as a fortress town offers an exemplary case. The city, she recalls, was originally built in 1765 "*to instil awe into the hearts of the neighbouring Kirgiz and all other Asiatics who might prove troublesome*" [1, 36]. The phrasing here is revealing: Kazakhs are subsumed under the broader category of "Asiatics," defined not by their culture or history but by their potential to disrupt imperial order. By uncritically reproducing this formula, Meakin imports Russian colonial categories into her own text, reinforcing the image of the steppe as a zone of latent danger.

At the same time, her ethnographic detail is couched in aestheticising language. The landscape is described through metaphors of delicacy and refinement: "*the slender stems of these graceful trees are covered with a delicate white bark resembling the kid of a lady's glove*" (Meakin 1901, p. 43). Horses "*fly like the wind*" [1, 44], yurts resemble beehives, and camels cry "*just like children at night*" [1, 37]. Such comparisons transform the steppe into a picturesque tableau, reducing cultural practices and natural phenomena to objects of visual or emotional spectacle. This aestheticisation is a hallmark of orientalist discourse, where unfamiliar realities are mediated through metaphors that render them legible to metropolitan readers while denying them complexity.

The logic of contrast reinforces this framing. Omsk is associated with cadet schools, gardens, and public ceremonies; the steppe with yurts, veiled women, and kumys-making. The juxtaposition suggests a spatial hierarchy: the town as a bulwark of civilisation, the steppe as a realm of arrested development. Kazakhs are explicitly divided into those "*who have not yet become 'Russianized'*" [1, 43] and those closer to assimilation. This binary, inherited from Russian colonial discourse, naturalises the idea that the value of indigenous populations lies in their capacity to be absorbed into imperial structures.

What complicates the picture is Meakin's repeated insistence on Kazakh hospitality. To her, they are "*the best-natured people on the face of the earth*" [1, 45]. Such affirmations do not negate the stereotypes of criminality or primitivism, but they inflect them with ambivalence. The Kazakhs appear simultaneously as noble nomads and potential horse thieves, as hospitable neighbours and exotic curiosities. For Meakin's British audience, this ambivalence would have resonated with familiar orientalist tropes of the noble savage [21] – a figure to be admired yet firmly contained within a civilisational hierarchy.

In this sense, Meakin's travelogue exemplifies how European representations of Siberia's indigenous peoples were shaped by a **double optic**: they are at once aestheticised as part of a colourful frontier landscape and subordinated within imperial categories of knowledge. This duality is crucial for understanding how interethnic relations in Siberia entered the European imagination: not as encounters between equals, but as spectacles framed by the intersecting lenses of Russian colonial discourse and Western orientalism.

5. Intercultural Mediations. One of the defining features of Annette Meakin's account is that her perception of the Kazakhs is never based on direct dialogue or extended self-representation. Instead, her encounters are consistently refracted through intermediaries – Jews, Germans, Russian officials – who already occupied specific niches within the imperial and colonial order of late imperial Siberia. This fact is not incidental: it reveals a structural condition of frontier life, where access to indigenous groups was shaped by layers of mediation and translation. As Mary Louise Pratt has argued in relation to other colonial peripheries, the "contact zone" is never symmetrical, but is constituted by hierarchies that privilege some voices and silence others. Meakin's A Ribbon of Iron offers a vivid example of this mechanism in the Siberian context.

5.1. Jewish mediation. The role of Jewish residents in Omsk illustrates how marginalized groups could become indispensable cultural brokers. Excluded from official society, yet deeply embedded in everyday commerce and mobility, Jewish intermediaries often acted as practical facilitators of contact with steppe populations. In Meakin's account, the figure of the Jewish guide is emblematic: his very self-identification underscores both his marginal status and his active agency. For European travellers, such figures provided the crucial link between urban centres and nomadic villages, demonstrating how knowledge of Kazakhs circulated not directly, but through actors whose own position in the imperial hierarchy was precarious. This paradox – marginality combined with indispensability – was a recurring feature of the Russian frontier, as shown in Jeff Sahadeo's work on Central Asian urban societies [17, 129].

5.2. German mediation. German settlers, by contrast, appear as authoritative interpreters rather than marginalised guides. Long established in Siberia, they occupied a distinct position as colonists, teachers, and pastors, often serving as bearers of European rationality in the imperial periphery. Their interpretations of Kazakh customs – whether in agriculture, animal husbandry, or religious practice – presented these as legible phenomena within a European epistemological framework. In Meakin's narrative, such voices effectively "translated" nomadic life into categories intelligible to outsiders. This reflects a broader dynamic identified by W. Sunderland [13]: the steppe was not only colonised militarily but also epistemologically, through settler groups who positioned themselves as mediators of knowledge between empire and nomads.

5.3. Russian mediation. A third layer of mediation emerges through Russian officials and institutions. The fortress origins of Omsk, the photographic albums of "types" commissioned by the Tsar, and the classificatory schemes distinguishing "Russianized" from "authentic" Kazakhs all exemplify how the state codified ethnic diversity into taxonomies. As A. Khalid and R. Crews have shown in the Central Asian context [15;16], imperial authorities used both religion and ethnicity as administrative categories, simultaneously recognising plurality and subordinating it to the logic of control. In Meakin's travelogue, this institutional mediation is visible in the way she adopts Russian colonial terminology ("Kirgiz") and frames Kazakh life through categories already embedded in imperial discourse.

Taken together, these mediations demonstrate that the image of the Kazakh steppe in A Ribbon of Iron is not simply the product of Meakin's personal impressions. It is the outcome of a layered process of translation in which Jews, Germans, and Russians each acted as filters, shaping what could be seen, what could be explained, and how it was framed for a European readership. The Kazakhs appear not as direct interlocutors but as figures refracted through multiple discourses, their voices subsumed under the authority of intermediaries.

For Meakin's readers in Britain, this multi-layered mediation reinforced the perception of the Kazakh steppe as a space of otherness, legible only through imperial and colonial grids of knowledge. The very structure of her narrative thus exemplifies the dynamics of the frontier as a "contact zone": a palimpsest of voices, hierarchically ordered, in which marginal groups could act as mediators, settler communities as interpreters, and imperial institutions as classifiers. In this sense, A Ribbon of Iron does not simply depict Kazakh life but also reveals the mechanics by which European observers accessed and represented it.

Conclusion. Annette Meakin's *A Ribbon of Iron* (1901) provides a particularly valuable case for studying the reception of Siberia's interethnic landscape in European travel writing at the turn of the twentieth century. Her journey, framed by the political upheavals of 1900, situates Siberia not as a neutral transit zone but as an imperial frontier marked by instability, ethnic diversity, and contested authority. The *Preface*, with its references to the Blagoveshchensk massacre, foregrounds the entanglement of military mobilisation and interethnic violence, preconditioning the reader to view the empire's eastern peripheries as volatile and fragile.

Within this framework, Omsk emerges as a paradigmatic frontier city – at once a symbol of Russian modernisation and a reminder of its origins as a fortress against "troublesome" nomads. Meakin's depiction of its multiethnic composition – Jews, Germans, Tatars, Russians, and Kazakhs – reflects the layered nature of everyday interactions in Siberia. Each group is assigned a position within an implicit hierarchy. Her ethnographic sketch of the Kazakhs encapsulates the ambivalence of European perceptions. This dual optic – admiration coupled with condescension – reflects the orientalist logic that shaped Western representations of Siberia's indigenous peoples.

Equally important is the mediated character of Meakin's encounters. Access to Kazakh life is provided through Jewish hosts, German settlers, and Russian officials, illustrating how knowledge of indigenous communities was filtered through layers of intermediaries. This mediation is not an incidental narrative detail but a structural feature of the Siberian frontier, where interethnic relations were constituted by networks of interaction rather than direct encounters.

As part of a broader inquiry into European travel writing, this case study underscores that Siberia was imagined not merely as a geographic periphery but as a multiethnic contact zone, where Jews, Germans, Tatars, Russians, and indigenous peoples interacted within asymmetrical structures of power. Meakin's narrative thus exemplifies the ways in which European observers perceived interethnic relations in late imperial Siberia – as complex, stratified, and deeply entangled with the imperial project itself.

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