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**ADOPTION OF CHRISTIANITY BY THE HIGHEST KALMYK  
NOBILITY IN THE 18TH CENTURY**

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*Abstract*

The formation of Russia as a multiethnic empire required the state to adopt the policy, which would ensure the integration of its people, supremacy of centripetal trends, and strength of its unity. The authorities considered the Orthodoxy of the non-Christian people including the Kalmyks as one of the key successful tools of such policy. The Christianization of Kalmyk nomads had to be that spiritual and ideological factor of their integration into a uniform national political, economic, sociocultural space of the country. The historical experience of missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church among the non-Christian people still did not receive an exhaustive comprehensive study, which in itself represents an urgent problem of historical science.

Among Kalmyk nomads the range and methods of activity of official church representatives prior to the beginning of the 20th century could not be (invariant) fixed, unchanged as they were carried out taking into account both external and internal factors, and considering the change of the status of nomads as part of Russia. During certain historical periods and depending on such changes the missionary activity of ROC were stopped or encouraged by the state, its forms and methods were also changed.

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**Keywords:** Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), missionary work, Kalmyk khanate, Kalmyk steppe, Kalmyks, Noions.



## 1. Introduction

The appearance of the Kalmyks in the European part of the Russian state dates back to the 17th century when in 1630 due to political disturbances and discord in Dzungaria the Taishi Hu-Urliuk with his six sons and 50 thousand nomad tents with his people moved through the Yaik River to the Volga steppes. His camps were stretched between the Yaik and the Volga, and from the Volga to the Caucasus Mountains where the Kalmyks were the only real military force for a long time. The Kalmyks came to Russia with their firm religion kept and supported by numerous and honorable part of society – Lamaistic clergy. Naturally, in such situation all actions of the Russian government regarding people were only limited to political assumptions and measures. However, the Kalmyks that settled within the Russian kingdom and, thus, by the force of circumstances were remote and isolated from their historical places of former living, gradually got under the influence of the Russian nation. Despite obstacles from nomadic aristocracy and clergy this isolation led to gradual penetration of Christianity into nomad camps (khanates). Please replace this text with context of your paper.

## 2. Problem Statement

The study of history, culture and religion of the Kalmyk people began in the 18th century by participants of academic expeditions organized by the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences in the Urals, the Volga region, Siberia, the North Caucasus. Their contribution to the study of the past of the Kalmyks is invaluable, it is connected with the formation and development of the Russian oriental studies, its transformation into a set of sciences, such as philology, history of philosophy, geography, religious studies (Lepyokhin, 1771; Georgi, 1799; Pallas, 1809).

Scientists of the 19th century, whose works contain important data on Christianization of the Kalmyks, put in perspective the traditional Buddhist religion. At the same time, they emphasized a positive potential of Orthodoxy not only as the religion bearing “the glare of truth”, but also as the religion ensuring sedentarization (Strakhov, 1810; Nefedyev, 1834; Byuler, 1846; Nebolsin, 1852).

Many issues on the history of the Kalmyk people including their Christianization were studied by the representatives of administration, which left valuable sources on the orthodox mission and the first Kalmyks converted to Orthodoxy (Bakunin, 1995; Tatishchev, 1996; Bentkovsky, 1880; Kostenkov, 1869).

If during the Soviet period the problem of Christianization of the Kalmyks was almost not covered (Grekulov, 1969; Kazhdan, Tokarev, Sakharov, 1967; Klibanov, 1989), then several papers were published in the Post-Soviet time revealing the tendency to objective assessment of orthodox missionaries, paying attention to the importance of their educational activity, describing the progressive value of Christianization of the Kalmyks (Belousov, 2003; Dordzhiyeva, 1995; Orlova, 2006).

Thus, domestic scientists made a certain contribution to the study of the history of Christianization of the Kalmyks and managed to collect extensive factual materials

## 3. Research Questions

The study covers political, economic, cultural and social aspects of the Kalmyks integration in the Russian Empire. Besides, it gives the analysis of history of development, organization and methods of missionary activity of ROC among the Kalmyks during the studied period, and defines its results.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the given paper is to study the missionary activity of ROC and its results among the Kalmyks as a component of domestic and foreign policy of the Russian Empire, i.e. to consider them in the general context of political history of the country in the 18th – end of the 19th centuries and the attitude of the central authorities to nomadic aristocracy. The missionary activity was one of the efficient ways of relaxation of the power of the Kalmyk Khanate ruler since the transition of the Kalmyk common people into internal areas of the country and their adoption of Orthodoxy outside the khanate were much encouraged and welcomed. At this stage the settlements of Kalmyks on the Don, in Chuguev, Stavropol-on-Volga, in the Ural were created outside the khanate and the first orthodox mission in the nomad camps of Baksadaya Dorzhi (baptized as Pyotr Tayshin).

#### **5. Research Methods**

The methodological base of the study includes descriptive and historical, comparative and historical, systematic methods of analysis of phenomena and events based on the principles of historicism, complexity and objectivity. This allows perceiving Christianization in its real development, in conjunction and in combination with other historical events and phenomena. The use of the specified principles and methods provides for objective assessment of events and facts taking into account the specifics of a certain period both in the history of Russia in general and Kalmykia in particular.

#### **6. Findings**

The shert' (an oath of allegiance sworn by non-Christian people) of Ayuki Khan on 27 February 1673 was the first evidence of Christianity within the Kalmyk khanate. The Kalmyk ruler made an oath to be faithful to the Russian state, to make campaigns on enemies together with the Russian voivodes, not to ruin the Russian cities and people and not to accept “monarchic villeins” to khanates. In return the Russian voivodes undertook to “to return non-Christian Kalmyks and Tatars of his Ayukayevy khanates, which decide to move to the cities of Imperial Majesty” (Russian Empire Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancellery, 1830).

The shert' record of 15 January 1677 made by Ayuki Khan on allegiance and obedience to the Russian state justifies the existence of baptized population in the Kalmyk khanate: “those Kalmyks that upon their will convert to the Orthodox Christian faith shall not be asked for or present a petition to the Great Tsar; and non-Christian Kalmyks and Tatars of his Ayukayevy khanates, which decide to move to the cities of Imperial Majesty shall be brought back” (Russian Empire Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancellery, 1830). This document demonstrates that the Kalmyks who accepted Orthodoxy were protected by the Russian government, which was mainly caused by unfriendly and hostile attitude towards converts from khanate owners. These conditions were confirmed by the shert' of 1683 (Russian Empire Imperial Majesty’s Own Chancellery, 1830).

Noticing such attitude embodied in arrangements between the ruler of the Kalmyk khanate and the representatives of the Russian government the Kalmyks began to adopt Christianity being chased by khanate authorities for any faults and crimes committed by them in khanates. This naturally caused the discontent of the Kalmyk khan and owners, and the Russian government was forced to accept some

concessions to avoid strain relations. This was recorded in another shert' of 1697: "So that the Kalmyks stolen something decide to run to monarchic cities alone or with their wives or children – not to accept and not to baptize them, but to detain them in cities and to write about them to Moscow and to Ayuki Khan; and those voivodes that baptize despite the decree shall pay thirty rubles per person and give it to Ayuki Khan, and if the town people decide to do this will pay the same money and sent to service".

Since the Kalmyk common people constituted a patrimonial real estate, the departure of one or families was equivalent to the loss of personal property. Therefore, the nomadic nobility, having negative attitude to the decision of the Russian government to leave the Kalmyks who adopted Christianity in Russian cities, interfered and held the newly-baptized people in khanates in every possible way. Perhaps, this explains the decision of authorities to give compensation to owners in the sum of 30 rubles for every baptized person.

It shall be noted that despite obstacles from khanate governors and Lamaistic clergy the number of the Kalmyks wishing to be baptized was steadily growing. In this respect especially for such Kalmyks the government decided to build a large settlement with a church above Saratov on the Tereshka River (Nefedyev, 1834). However, in about ten years it was burned by Ayuki Khan and its population was taken back to khanates. To secure the Kalmyks who accepted Orthodoxy, the government decided to settle them in Kharkiv province in Chuguev, having ranked them to the Cossack regiments and paying salary and food. No measures to promote the transition of the Kalmyks to Christianity were recorded in this period. As it was stated above, the Kalmyks were willing to accept Orthodoxy mainly to avoid punishment for certain offenses.

The first order of the Government on granting privileges to baptized people dates back to 1720. In particular, the Senatorial decree of 1 September 1720 states: "Those non-Christian people of different nations that accepted Orthodox Greek belief or which will collectively accept it from now on will be granted benefits for all governmental charges for three years to ensure better dissemination of the Orthodox Greek belief. And if only a few people will adopt Christianity from the total community ... the benefit for the calculation of animals will be granted only to those that accept the sacred baptism ..." (Russian Empire Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery, 1830). One of the stages of governmental measures aimed at the distribution of Orthodoxy among the Kalmyk people ends with this order. The transition of the Kalmyks to Orthodoxy was not widespread and was not full of goodwill to join the Holy Scriptures. In many cases these desires were mercantile. Sometimes it was initiated by the Russian population that baptized those who worked for them or the young Kalmyks. Sometimes the noions did not prevent their dependents from baptism. Thus, for example in 1714 the Kalmyk Erine was sent to Astrakhan to be baptized "... Chadorzhapova possession that Taishi released to adopt the Christian faith".

The number of the Kalmyks who adopted Christianity during this period is unknown. It can only be said that all cases were single, there was not mass adoption of Orthodoxy. Though in 1724 the State Board of Foreign Affairs reported to the Holy Synod that in 1723 it was addressed by Fedor Khrushchov from Simbirsk, to whom Adyan Bakshi came "with friends, wives and children from Dondukov khanate of Ayuki Khan". Adyan told that many years ago, "soon after the conquest of Azov", they among three thousand nomad tents left the Kalmyk steppes to the Russian cities where many accepted baptism. Thus, Adyan Bakshi was named Yakim Yuryev. The newly-baptized Kalmyks settled near the Don River. But during

the Bulavinsky Revolt the Kalmyks were defeated and 500 nomad tents moved to Saratov, where there were captured by the people of the Ayuki Khan. Now they came to Simbirsk. The board on behalf of the emperor sent the diploma to the Astrakhan voivode who was told to define lands for the newcomers. In turn, the Holy Synod wrote to the Kazan metropolitan Tikhon to render assistance to the newcomers to strengthen their Christian faith and build a church for them.

It shall be noted that the Astrakhan voivode Artemy Petrovich Volynsky was a resolute supporter of the transition of the Kalmyks to Orthodoxy. According to him, the Epiphany of the Kalmyks was not only the important religious but also a political step, as a means of their full submission to the Russian power and further assimilation. In particular, taking the advantage of the conflict between Ayuki Khan and the owner Dugar, he sent Tseren, the son of the latter one, to Moscow where he was baptized under the name of the Prince Vasily Dugarov. Together with him the baptism was adopted by his people who settled near the Tereshka River above Saratov. It is possible that the father Tseren, the owner Dugar, was also baptized.

During the Persian campaign and the visit of Peter I to the nomad camps of Ayuki Khan, the Astrakhan voivode again initiated the adoption of Christianity by the population of the Kalmyk khanate. But as he was assured by khanate owners who decisively rejected these claims that "... remaining under their law they can be faithful to the Russian Tsar" (Vitevsky, 1897).

On 20 January 1724 His Imperial Majesty's Edict was issued, which for the first time in the history of the Russian-Kalmyk relationship made it clear "... to force the owners and legalists of the Kalmyks to adopt Christianity through the doctrine and translation of books into their language" (Russian Empire Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery, 1830). Up to this moment the address of the Kalmyks was quite accidental and there were no government directives to induce them to adopt Christianity. A new stage concerning a religious issue in relation to the Kalmyks from the government started in the period of the Persian campaign when Peter the Great paid special attention to the fact that the Kalmyk owners have no prejudiced attitude to the Christian faith in general and to Orthodoxy in particular. Perhaps, this was the time when he came up with an idea to address the nobility and commoners of the Kalmyk khanate to Christianity. However, the Zakaspiysky campaign, which grew into the Persian War forced Peter I to postpone his plans until more peaceful times. Already on 19 April 1724, in commemoration of this His Imperial Majesty issued the edict, according to which for the quickest transition of the Kalmyks to Christianity it was necessary "... to seek such teachers, which could educate the Kalmyk people and as soon as such teachers were found, to report on them to His Imperial Majesty" (Russian Empire Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery, 1830).

On the same day this Imperial Edict was announced by synodic vice presidents Feodosiy, Archbishop of Novgorod, and Feofan the Archbishop of Pskov to the Holy Synod. On May 27 the Holy Synod considering "that Hieromonch of Astrakhan David Eskalube" decided: "... Hieromonch of Astrakhan David Eskalube shall go for spiritual purpose to those places where its imperial majesty the aide-de-camp general, colonel and the governor of Astrakhan province mister Volynsky will stay and shall permanently be with Volynsky" (Russian Empire Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery, 1830).

By the decree of July 15 the Synod assigned the above resolution on search of persons knowing the Kalmyk language to bishops of Nizhny Novgorod, Siberia, Kazan and Astrakhan, the Prior Makaryevsky of Zheltovodsky monastery "and other spiritual persons to settlement of these people in adjacent places".

Besides, the Synod decided to engage the “dismissed Astrakhan governor Volynsky baptized as Ivan Kondakov”, which “is requested as a priest to stay with Kalmyk people striving for baptism”, and by the decree of June 2 decided: “to send Ivan Kondakov from Moscow to St. Petersburg to study in the Slovenian School at the Alexander Nevski Monastery for him to become a church priest, and before that until he stays in Moscow, to give him six kopeks with a usual expense note for food from the Synod office of foreign money, and upon his departure to St. Petersburg, to give ten rubles for transportation with the corresponding expenditure receipt”. Hence, the relevant decree was sent to the Synod vice president Feodosiy, Archbishop of Novgorod.

Thus, it was decided to search for people knowing the Kalmyk language who could promote the transition of the Kalmyks to Christianity and teach them the fundamentals of Orthodoxy. Unfortunately, all stated resolutions did not bring the desired success since the above archbishops were only limited to receiving reports. The prior of the Zheltovodsky monastery did not even do this. Meanwhile, the Kalmyks were still willing to adopt Christianity and this will was constantly increasing. This required special attention of the Russian government to, whenever possible, spread the ideas of Christian teaching among pagans. The desire of Buddhist Kalmyks to adopt Orthodoxy was also triggered by disorders and conflicts among the Kalmyk nomadic nobility.

The death of Ayuki Khan generated discords in his family, its numerous successors begin fight for the khan power and the khan throne by splitting into the fighting parties. The Ayuki’s successor, his eldest son Chakdorzhap did not survive his father and gave the hereditary khan’s seal to his eldest son Dasangu. Meanwhile, Ayuki wanted another son Tseren-Donduk to be the successor of his khanate. Many khanate owners wanted the grandson of Ayuki Khan vigorous Donduk-Ombo to take the throne. Besides, the protege of the Russian government, the first cousin once removed of Ayuki Dordzhi Nazarov, also claimed for a vacant throne of the Kalmyk khanate. First, the authorities wished to have the whip over the Kalmyks. Second, Peter the Great wanted Dordzhi Nazarov to be the khan.

Having learned about the death of Ayuki Khan, by the decree of 16 April 1724 the Ruling Senate ordered the Astrakhan governor A.P. Volynsky to declare Dordzhi Nazarov a khan. However, he gave a definitive refusal and Tseren-Donduk became the vicegerent of the khanate and given the Charter on 22 February 1725.

Shortly before A.P. Volynsky planned to support another Ayuki’s son – Dasang with the military force. But he considered it safer to be in close proximity to local administrative government and, having lost the majority of his dependents at the very beginning of the civil strife, removed to Astrakhan. Then the governor advised Dasang to send his brother Baksaday Dordzhi to the emperor Pyotr Alekseyevich to ask his protection against enemies. At the same time, in the letter sent with Baksaday, the governor mentioned his desire to adopt the Christian faith. On 4 June 1724 the chancellor count G.I. Golovkin wrote to the Synod: “His Imperial Majesty decreed the grandson of Ayuki Khan Baksaday Dordzhi to accept at his desire the Orthodox Greek faith ... to give one skillful spiritual person that could educate him and prepare for baptism”. The Holy Synod appointed the priest of the Moscow Annunciation Cathedral Mikhail Slonsky who accompanied Taishu from Moscow to St. Petersburg and back.

Baksaday Dordzhi was accepted at the imperial court where he was baptized on Sunday 15 November 1724. The emperor Peter the Great became his godfather and the newly baptized was named in

his honor Pyotr Petrovich Tayshin. Soon, the Astrakhan governor A.P. Volynsky received His Imperial Majesty's Edict, according to which the governor had to give the salary of 1000 rubles to Pyotr Tayshin from customs duties and 500 quarters of bread, to provide his protection "... against offenses of brothers and other owners and to defend with troops and appoint an inspector who would constantly be close to him and which shall be chosen from the Shakhmatovs or other similar family at the discretion of the governor" (Yushtin, 1883).

When Tayshin left St. Petersburg to the steppe he was given 1000 rubles for travelling and 500 rubles of "furs", besides he was given the military group consisting of a sergeant and 24 dragoons plus another ten Cossacks. The lieutenant Luka Shakhmatov was the inspector of the prince Tayshin together with the assistant of Saratov the noble son Alexey Levashev and the translator Kuzma Kozonkov. Besides, the decree entrusted the priest Gorletsky, two psalmists, a sexton and five school students from Slavo-Greek-Latin Academy with salary to go to the Kalmyk steppe with Pyotr Tayshin, which "could study the Kalmyk language and writing there and become priests and deacons". Soon Nicodemus Linkevich, a hieromonch of the Alexander Nevski Monastery, was appointed the priest.

Peter I ordered to build an ambulatory church for his godson "to begin his divine service". The Synod charged this case to the super-intendant Zarudnev – "to immediately establish everything from good materials and the highest skill; and to purchase the materials for this construction and to place the sacred images and other things, money how much needed to take from the Stats-office" (Russian Empire Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery, 1830). Unfortunately, Peter the Great did not live up to the end of the church construction: he died on 28 January 1725.

The ambulatory church was built "on the model of the Kalmyk nomad tents, according to a special drawing, to the sky, except an arch, in the straight wall – 3 arsheens, in width, on diameter, through the middle of the lower circle – 10 arsheens; and the iconostasis shall be placed eight arsheens from the middle to the altar half, from good silk material, divided into two parts from the middle by a veil, the height against straight walls – three arsheens, and the width of each half – 4 arsheens; and on those veils, by the example of regimental banners to draw imperial doors in the middle, and on the sides – the images of Resurrection and Christmas and the Leaders of the Apostles Peter and Paul; and in the upper part of the iconostasis in the middle – the Crucifixion, and at the edges – St. John the Forerunner and St. Elijah the Prophet; and the altar and the side-altar are made folding, height – 11/4 arsheens, the width of the altar – 1 arsheen and the side-altar – 3/4" (Complete collection of resolutions and orders on department of orthodox confession of the Russian Empire. Vol. IV. No. 1439, pp. 300-301.). The painter Ivan Adolsky was assigned to make the drawing with a scale for this construction. The protector of schools and printing houses the archimandrite Gabriel sent by the Holy Synod on February 8 to inspect the new church found out that the church "is very big, wide and high, that there are no such wide and high tents or sheds anywhere". Then it was necessary to build a smaller church: "width – half-six arsheens, height – half-five arsheens and to write icons following the sent pattern". Its construction and supply with religious attributes cost 650 rubles 19 kopeks: ware, "though not rich, but imported and beautiful"; books were issued from the property of Pakhomiy, the former metropolitan of Voronezh, from a Synod vestry and vestries of the Andreevsky Monastery.

The new church was consecrated on Wednesday 17 February 1725 in the Synod Vaulted Chamber in honor of the Resurrection (Yushtin, 1883). All newly baptized Kalmyks were instructed so that nobody

went to church “except in the specified time” and did not let the cattle in, but “would honor this church as the house of God, as the Christian religion commands”.

Undoubtedly, the epiphany of Baksaday Dordzhi was an important event in the history of Christianity among the Kalmyk people. First, since he was a sovereign person, for many Kalmyks his baptism was undoubtedly an outstanding example to follow, especially among his dependents, and at the beginning after the sacrament. Second, which is even more important, this baptism caused vigorous activities in the central government to set similar missions among the Kalmyks. In particular, the hieromonch Nicodemus zealously began to extend Christianity among the population of the Kalmyk khanate and in 1728 there were already 40 nomad baptized families of the Kalmyks, or 176 persons of both sexes. Even before that he wrote to the archimandrite Gabriel about the desire of the wife of Pyotr Tayshin to become Orthodox. The letter was sent to the Holy Synod with the report of Tsarenyanzhi, in which she expressed her strong desire to be baptized. The report was given to the Empress Catherine I, who through the Holy Synod announced her consent to this. In February 1726 the Synod published the decree, according to which the princess and all the Kalmyks wishing to be baptized, shall not face any resistance from local authorities. Thus, it was officially forbidden to interfere with the baptism of the Kalmyks, and on the contrary, the temporal and spiritual authorities were ordered to promote baptism in all places they want.

Tsarenyanzhi hosted a sacred baptism only under Anna Ioannovna’s reign, after the death of her husband Pyotr Tayshin. The epiphany took place in St. Petersburg by the hieromonch Varlaam in the Church of the Transfiguration of the Preobrazhensky Regiment. The Empress was the godmother and therefore the corresponding name was given – Anna Tayshina. She, her children, her citizens were assigned a place for settlement where they would not be captured by the authorities of the Kalmyk khanate. This was one of the first mass settlements of the baptized Kalmyks.

Due to vigorous activity of the Father Nicodemus, the baptism of the Kalmyks was successful. Thus, from 1725 to 1730 he baptized 432 Kalmyks, from 1732 to 1734 – 1232 more Kalmyks were baptized. According to the Astrakhan Spiritual Consistory, in total 2883 (863 nomad families) of the Kalmyk khanate were baptized. As the Father Nicodemus reported, even one representatives of the Kalmyk clergy –Diozik adopted Christianity. He also urged the Synod administration to take immediate measures to return the prisoners, to pacify the dissatisfied in the steppe so that the baptized Kalmyks would not scattered away without feeling protection. Thus, this was the end to efforts of the government and missionaries.

Meanwhile, both ordinary Kalmyks, and, especially, the owners were quite negative to ecclesiastics in the territory of the Kalmyk khanate and to baptism in general. Thus, in 1730 the owner Dasang attacked the baptized Kalmyks, beat them, robbed, and partially took them to his khanate. Since the escapes of the Kalmyks from khanates became quite frequent, the owners started to complain of governmental orders concerning baptism. In 1734 Donduk-Ombo appealed to the Russian government demanding to return the baptized Kalmyks belonging to him. If they cannot be returned on religious reasons, he agreed that they were transferred to Pyotr Tayshin. Later the Cabinet Council adopted the resolution on the transition of the baptized Kalmyks from the khanates to Russia, and those who just took the decision to be baptized were not left in the cities of the Volga region and sent to Pyotr Tayshin. In general, the Russian government in its desire to adopt baptism and regarding the choice of residence tried not to constrain the Kalmyks.

The main achievement of the government is the establishment of the Orthodox mission among the Kalmyk people, i.e. it took personal control over the transition of the Kalmyks to Orthodoxy. In many respects, it was connected with the fact that the baptized Kalmyks began to come back to khanates without feeling care and protection, which is accompanied by the return to the old faith. Such mass phenomenon as denial from Christianity could not but remain unnoticed and could not but attract attention of the government. It took some measures to strengthen the Orthodoxy among the newly baptized people, and one of such measures was the construction of a special town – Stavropol-on-Volga for the princess Anna Tayshina and her people.

## 7. Conclusion

On the basis of the factual material the study makes the following reasonable conclusions: Christianization of the Kalmyks served as spiritual and ideological factor of their integration into the uniform political, economic and sociocultural space of the Russian Empire; the appeal of the Kalmyks to Orthodoxy was a consequence in some cases, while in others – a prerequisite from resettlement on the territory of the country, mainly in the most problematic southern and southeast regions; the latter one served geopolitical interests of Russia in its opposition to the Ottoman Empire and its people; the baptism and the related outflow of the Kalmyks, not only the common people but also the representatives of nobility from the khanate resulted in the relaxation of khans' and noions' rule, which eventually, played a key role in the liquidation of the khanate as such.

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