The Problem of Ethnic Identification of the Yurt Tatars. Translation from Russian[1]

Rastyam T. Aliev

National Research University "Higher School of Economics". Saint Petersburg, Russia.
Email: rastaliev[at]gmail.com ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2812-7655

Abstract

In contemporary historiography, the question of the ethnogenesis of the Yurt Tatars on the Astrakhan frontier remains particularly relevant. Various scholars and local historians, drawing on extensive archival sources and accounts by travellers and merchants, offer different interpretations of the ethnic origins of the Astrakhan Tatars. This article presents a systematic analysis of the historiography on the subject, examines diverse archival materials, and argues that the Turkic population of Astrakhan, known as the *Yurt Tatars*, underwent a complex and prolonged process of development. Beginning in the 16th century, this group was identified in sources as a distinct ethnic community, often contrasted with the Nogais. In the 17th century, the term underwent further semantic evolution and, by the end of the century, came to refer to service-class Turkic groups, including the Edisan Nogais. By the 18th and 19th centuries, *Yurt Tatars* had ceased to denote a single, unified ethnos and instead functioned as a collective term encompassing various ethnic groups structured into a clear social hierarchy: Tatar and Nogai murzas and herd commanders, service categories, and dependent strata such as *yasashnye* and *Emesh* Tatars. In light of this ethno-social complexity, the article concludes that scholarly attempts to assign the Yurt Tatars to any single ethnic category are unfounded.

Keywords

Frontier; Astrakhan Tatars; Yurt Tatars; Emesh Tatars; Yasak Tatars; Nogais; Edisans; Jetisans; Interstadial; Liminality

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Проблема этнической идентификации юртовских татар. Перевод с русского языка[1]

Алиев Растям Туктарович

Национальный исследовательский университет «Высшая школа экономики» в Санкт-Петербурге. Санкт-Петербург, Россия. Email: rastaliev[at]gmail.com
ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2812-7655

Аннотация

В современной историографии вопрос об этногенезе юртовских татар на астраханском фронтире остаётся особо актуальным. Различные учёные и краеведы на основе множества архивных данных и свидетельств путешественников и купцов дают свои объяснения этнической принадлежности Астраханских татар. Автор данной статьи делает попытку системного анализа историографии по данной проблематике, рассматривает различные архивные данные и приходит к выводу, что тюркское население Астрахани, известное под названием «юртовские татары», прошло довольно долгий путь своего развития. Начиная с XVI в. эта группа населения представляла собой отдельный этнос, противопоставляющийся в источниках ногайцам. В XVII в. происходит дальнейшее развитие термина и его трансформация к концу столетия в обозначение служилого тюркского населения, куда входят также и ногайцы-едисанцы. А уже в XVIII-XIX вв. юртовские татары характеризуются не как единый монолитный этнос, а в качестве собирательного названия разных этнических групп, выстроившихся в чёткую социальную структуру: татарского и ногайского происхождения мурзы и табунные головы, служилые категории, зависимые ясашные и емешные татары и т. д. Таким образом, учитывая сложность социальной и этнической структуры юртовских татар, попытки некоторых учёных причислить юртовцев к тому или иному конкретному этносу не имеют оснований.

Ключевые слова

фронтир; астраханские татары; юртовские татары; емешные татары; ясачные татары; ногайцы; едисанцы; джетисанцы; интерстадиал; лиминальность

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Introduction

At present, the question of the ethnogenesis and ethnic structure of the Astrakhan (Yurt) Tatars in the Lower Volga region remains especially relevant. In historiography, this problem is still considered unresolved.

For instance, Kazan-based historians—particularly the prominent ethnologist D. M. Iskhakov—argue that the Astrakhan Tatars occupy a distinct niche within the structure of the broader Tatar ethnos, classifying them as a specific category of ethno-territorial groups, rather than ethnic communities per se (Iskhakov, 2014, p. 12). In particular, Iskhakov asserts that the Astrakhan Tatars did not undergo a process of consolidation with the Volga-Ural Tatars into a unified ethnic community until the end of the 19th century at the earliest. This process, he contends, culminated in the adoption by all Astrakhan Tatars of the shared national ethnonym "Tatars" (p. 13). According to him, the decisive factor in this consolidation was the "ethnic blending of various Tatar groups within Astrakhan Governorate" (p. 13). Thus, rather than emphasizing the ethnic or territorial belonging of the Astrakhan Tatars to the larger Tatar nation, he highlights their ethno-territorial character, suggesting that the Yurt Astrakhan Tatars emerged as a result of the intermixing of different ethnic groups within a single region.

In regional historiography, a prevailing viewpoint suggests the existence of a "hiatus or pause (interstadial) in the ethnic development of the Turkic peoples of the Lower Volga" (Syzranov, 2008, p. 168), a thesis proposed by the Astrakhan-based historian and ethnographer V. M. Viktorin. According to him, the population of the Astrakhan Khanate abandoned its homeland prior to the incorporation of the khanate's territory into the Moscow state in 1556. It was later replaced—by the late 16th to early 17th centuries—by Nogai groups who had migrated from the Great Nogai Horde (Viktorin, 1991, pp. 46–50). These newcomers, according to Viktorin, formed a distinct group known as the "Astrakhan" or "Yurt" Tatars, sometimes also referred to as Nogai Tatars (1995, pp. 7–8).

This view is supported by the Moscow-based historian and Nogai specialist V. V. Trepavlov. In his works on the history of the Nogai Horde, Trepavlov, following Viktorin, maintains that the population of the Astrakhan Khanate fled the region in response to Russian military campaigns, while also noting that a small part of the population later returned. He further points out that in the early 17th century, Nogais from the Edisan (Jetisan) Horde integrated into the Yurt Tatar milieu (Trepavlov, 2002, pp. 299, 431, 435). This claim is supported by the observation of 19th-century Russian ethnographer P. I. Nebolsin, who wrote that the left bank of the Volga—where the Russian city of Astrakhan was located—served as a Nogai wintering ground (Nebolsin, 1852, p. 59).

The scholar N. M. Vaskin considers the Yurt Tatars to be the historical inhabitants of the Astrakhan Khanate. His principal argument rests on documentary

evidence indicating that during the period of the khanate's incorporation into the Russian state, "they numbered 25,000 bows" (Vaskin, 1973, p. 32).

The Astrakhan-based archaeologist E. V. Shnaidshtein maintains that the Yurt Tatars emerged as a result of a centuries-long process of interaction between Turkic and Mongol populations, dating back to the period of Pecheneg domination in the southern Russian steppes (1975, p. 15). According to her, this interaction ultimately determined the formation of a new ethnic group (1989, p. 29).

Following Shnaidshtein's line of reasoning, the Astrakhan local historian R. U. Dzhumanov further backdates the origins of the Yurt Tatars, tracing their heritage to the Khazar Khaganate (1989, p. 24).

By contrast, Astrakhan historian I. V. Toropitsyn argues that the Yurt Tatars were not formed as an ethnic group, but rather as a "service category of the population of the Russian state" (2014a, p. 229). As evidence, he points to the internal heterogeneity of the Yurt Tatars, distinguishing among feudal nobility, service classes, and dependent groups (such as the Yasak and Emesh Tatars) (2014b, pp. 220–228).

As for the sources on this issue, they can be divided into two groups. The first includes travel notes and testimonies by foreign travellers and Russian merchants. The second consists of archival documents that shed light on the interactions between the state authorities and representatives of the Astrakhan Tatars, revealing certain aspects of their ethnic and social structure.

It should be noted that the first group of sources points to a Nogai origin of the Astrakhan Yurt Tatars, but provides little detail regarding their internal organization. For example, the English diplomat Anthony Jenkinson wrote that

> "all the land on the left bank of the Volga and Kama rivers, all the way to Astrakhan and beyond… is called the land of the Mangyts or Nogais… During my stay in Astrakhan there was a great famine and plague, especially among the Nogai Tatars, who came here to surrender themselves to the Russians, their enemies, and to seek help from them, as their own land had been devastated…" (Alekseev, 1936, p. 46).

Another traveller, Christopher Barrow, a clerk of the English trading company, described a fire that occurred in "a settlement of Nogai Tatars three-quarters of a mile from the Astrakhan fortress, known as a 'yurt'." He also noted that these Nogais were "vassals of the Russian tsar" (Kidirniyazov, 1999, p. 152).

Adam Olearius, a German scholar and traveller, wrote in 1638:

> "The local Tatars—some of whom are Nogais and others Crimeans—are not allowed to live within the city itself, but only outside its walls, in designated areas they may surround with wattle fences" (Alekseev, 1936, p. 69).

A slightly different perspective is offered by the Russian merchant Fedot Kotov, who visited Astrakhan in 1623. He wrote:

> "Below and around the city are Tatar yurts. All Tatar dwellings are dug into the ground, fenced with wattle, and coated with clay. In the steppe around the city, the Nogais roam—subjects of the sovereign" (Kidirniyazov, 1999, p. 192).

Here we see a clear distinction between the Tatars and the Nogais: Kotov refers to the yurts as Tatar, while the nomads in the steppe are identified as Nogais.

The situation is diverse with the archival sources. An initial examination reveals a somewhat different picture regarding the problem under discussion. Therefore, our principal task is to typologize and structure these sources in order to trace the evolution of the internal ethno-social structure of the Astrakhan Tatars. This group of sources makes such analysis possible. For that reason, our study will proceed chronologically. Accordingly, we have identified archival materials from three centuries: the 16th, 17th, and 18th.

Analysis

One of the first observations that emerges from the analysis of archival sources is the clear distinction made between the Nogais and the "Astrakhan people" as early as the 16th century. When considering the situation in the years immediately following the annexation of the Astrakhan Khanate, it is important to highlight the works of I. V. Toropitsyn and I. V. Zaitsev, both of whom argue against the notion of an "interstadial" period in the region's ethnogenesis. For instance, Toropitsyn (2015) cites the historian S. M. Solovyov, who wrote:

> "The chernye liudi [commoners] began then to approach the voivodes, to swear allegiance and to petition that the tsar show mercy and allow them to live as before in Astrakhan and to pay tribute, and not to punish them... Many of the Astrakhan people, just like the Nogais, were at that time fleeing from the Russian army" (p. 246).

This reference is to non-urban dwellers, the rural inhabitants of the Astrakhan region. Such evidence suggests that following the annexation in 1556, only part of the population—likely the upper class—fled the region, while the rest hid and eventually returned to their former way of life once the situation stabilized.

The words of Ivan the Terrible in his correspondence with the Nogai bey Ismail in 1562 further support this view. The tsar wrote:

> "It is not possible for us to expel these princes soon, because when we took Astrakhan, we gave our word of favour to the Astrakhan princes that they need not fear separation or execution from us. Otherwise, it would be said in other lands that faith is the enemy of faith, and that a Christian sovereign exterminates Muslims" (Solovyov, 1989, p. 474).

Here, the first Russian tsar refers to the Astrakhan princes (murzas), whom the Nogai bey Ismail had requested be expelled from their lands.

Another side of this correspondence is equally revealing. The Nogai murzas complained to the tsar that they were being harassed by the Astrakhan Tatars: "The Astrakhan people provoke us with Ivan Vyrodkov..." (Mustafina & Trepavlov, 2006, p. 292). In his archival analysis, I. V. Toropitsyn also cites similar episodes of complaint: "The Astrakhan people attack the Nogais, who 'dwell along the Yema River,' and 'wage war on them'" (Toropitsyn, 2015, p. 247). What is evident here is not merely a terminological distinction between "Astrakhan people" (referring

to the Yurt Tatars) and the Nogais, but an entire system of interethnic relations. Russian authorities clearly understood the difference between these two groups.

Moreover, the events of 1569—specifically the campaign of the Crimean Tatar army against Astrakhan, with the active support of the Astrakhan Tatars for the side hostile to Russia—further illustrate that even in sociopolitical terms, the Yurt Tatars were opposed to Russia's allies, the Nogais (Toropitsyn, 2015, p. 249).

Evidence that the term "Astrakhan people" referred not to Russian settlers but to the indigenous Turkic population of the former Astrakhan Khanate can also be found in a report to the Posolsky Prikaz (Ambassadorial Office) by the Astrakhan voivode I. N. Odoyevsky in April 1615. He noted:

> "Astrakhan people, Your Majesty, the old residents, told us, your humble servants, that in previous years the Crimean khan and Turkish forces came to Astrakhan, claiming they were marching against the Qizilbash. But instead of going against the Qizilbash, they came to Astrakhan" (*Kabardino-Russian Relations in the 16th–18th Centuries*, Vol. 1, 1957, p. 90).

This passage refers to how the Crimean Tatar khan sent advance word of his arrival to the local Turkic population of Astrakhan, reinforcing the interpretation that "Astrakhan people" in this context meant the indigenous Turkic, particularly Tatar, population rather than Russians.

Thus, we see that the former Tatar population of Astrakhan continued to reside in the region even after its incorporation into Russia in the 16th century and that it was clearly differentiated from the Nogais in the sources. Therefore, the idea of a chronological "gap" in the presence of Turkic populations in Astrakhan —a so-called interstadial—must be ruled out.

A vast body of 17th-century archival sources related to the Astrakhan region continues to illustrate the evolving use of the term "Yurt Tatars" in reference to the local Turkic population.

I. V. Toropitsyn, relying on the authority of the prominent specialist in feudal history A. A. Novoselsky, argues that, by the 17th century, the Yurt Tatars could already be regarded as a service stratum within Russian society (Toropitsyn, 2014b, p. 221). A. A. Novoselsky himself noted a clear distinction in the 17th century between the Yurt Tatars and the Edisan Tatars, stating that the former were under the leadership of the descendants of Murza Tinbai, while the latter were under the descendants of Murza Urus (Novoselsky, 1948, p. 56). This undermines the commonly accepted view that Edisan Nogais had already assimilated into the Yurt Tatar milieu in the first third of the 17th century (Syzranov, 2008, p. 168). Archival data provide strong evidence to refute this claim.

This distinction is further confirmed in the so-called mandate issued to the Astrakhan voivodes I. Korobyin and Prince F. Kurakin. The mandate explicitly ordered a census to be conducted "at the zaklad court of the enlisted murzas," instructing the officials to determine how many "herd commanders, Tatars, and Edisans now reside in the Yurt settlements, and what occupations they pursue," and to send to Moscow "a name-by-name register of all service people, enlisted

murzas, clan leaders, Yurt Tatars, Edisans, and working people" (Historical Acts Collected and Published by the Archaeographic Commission, Vol. 3, 1841, pp. 253-254). This passage vividly illustrates the authorities' awareness of the distinct ethnic affiliations of the Edisans and the Yurt Tatars.

Another example comes from 1645, when the Astrakhan Turkic population participated alongside Russian troops in the Crimean campaign led by Prince S. Pozharsky. Documentary evidence indicates that Nogai, Jetisan (Edisan), and Yurt murzas were ordered to join the Russian army "together with all their ulus people" (Acts of the Moscow State, Published by the Imperial Academy of Sciences, Vol. II, 1894). Again, we observe a clear distinction among various Turkic groups, with the Yurt Tatars explicitly listed separately from the Edisans.

Even in the second third of the 17th century, this differentiation remains evident. The tendency of Russian authorities to distinguish among elite groups within the Yurt community is further demonstrated by the mandate issued to I. K. Pervoy, appointed by the Astrakhan voivodes in October 1661 to serve as head over the Nogai, Jetisan (Edisan), and Yurt Tatars. The document instructed a face-to-face review "according to the list" of all Yurt murzas, herd commanders, centurions and decurions, as well as all rank-and-file "chernye" [common] Tatars and Nogais (Toropitsyn, 2014b, p. 223). Here again, we see not only a division between Nogai and Tatar murzas, but also a classification of the lower social strata by ethnic affiliation.

In his analysis of archival materials from the final third of the 17th century, I. V. Toropitsyn emphasizes that by this period the term *Yurt Tatars* had begun to function as a collective designation for several distinct ethnic groups, notably including both the Edisan Nogais and the Yurt Tatars themselves. In various documents from that time, the term "Yurt" was already being applied not only to the Yurt Tatars in the strict sense but also, albeit somewhat conditionally, to Nogai groups. This trend, however, remained inconsistent up to the mid-18th century. For example, in 1694, a petition was submitted to the authorities on behalf of "Yurt murzas, herd commanders, and Tatar centurions: Prince Kazy, son of Prince Aliev Urusov and his associates, herd commanders Ishey Koshkarin and his companions, and Tatar centurion Tlev Urazaev and his companions" (*Historical Acts Collected and Published by the Archaeographic Commission*, Vol. 5, 1841, p. 419). In this source, the Edisan murza Urusov is no longer classified by Russian officials as a separate representative of the Nogai nobility, but rather is regarded as part of the service class of the Yurt Tatars (Toropitsyn, 2014b, p. 225). This development marks a significant shift in the semantic evolution of the term *Yurt Tatars*, which increasingly came to be used not as a strict ethnonym but as a general label for various Turkic groups residing in the Astrakhan region.

Another important aspect of this issue is the presence, among the so-called "black" Yurt population, of both social categories and possible ethnic subdivisions, though the latter remain difficult to determine due to the fragmentary and limited nature of the available sources. Existing evidence suggests the presence of three

major social strata within the Yurt milieu: *service Tatars* (*sluzhilye*), *yasak-paying Tatars* (*yasashnye*), and *Emesh Tatars*. The first group did not include murzas or herd commanders but constituted a separate category. For example, a petition submitted to the Astrakhan authorities in September 1761 refers to these distinctions: "The Yurt murzas of Astrakhan, the herd commanders, along with their service and yasak-paying men, humbly petition…" (Toropitsyn, 2014a, p. 231). Here we see a clear division between two social layers of Yurt society: *sluzhilye* and *yasashnye*.

The name of the latter most likely derives from the term *yasak*—a traditional tribute or tax in kind. Under this designation there was a special category of dependent "black" Yurt Tatars who paid *yasak* to their murzas. Crucially, as noted in the documents, they were not considered part of the service estate. Given the feudal character of social relations in the Yurt context during the 17th–18th centuries, and in light of corresponding Russian legal norms, it may be inferred that the *yasak Tatars* represented the indigenous Tatar population remaining in the region after the annexation of the Astrakhan Khanate by the Russian state. This group was subsequently brought under the control of Yurt and Nogai murzas, becoming a dependent class.

The third social stratum identified in archival sources is composed of the so-called *Emesh Tatars*. Although comprehensive information about them is lacking, a brief description is provided in the 1835 edition of the *Encyclopedic Lexicon:* A–Afo, which states:

> "…Emesh Tatars, from the word *emek*, i.e., fodder or labor, are the descendants of captives taken by the Astrakhan Tatars during wars with neighboring peoples. They lived—and still live—on lands granted to herd commanders and murzas, whom they serve in household labor, more by custom than by obligation or coercion. They are presently governed by eight herd commanders and four murzas, who oversee their economic activities, arbitrate minor disputes, and collect taxes for local needs" (Grech, 1835, p. 359).

As we can see from this 19th-century encyclopedic source, this group within the Yurt population constituted a dependent class. Their dependence manifested itself in "service within the households of herd commanders and murzas." The text also emphasizes their origins: "descendants of captives taken by the Astrakhan Tatars in wars with neighboring peoples."

This indicates that the ethnic background of the Emesh Tatars may have been quite diverse—ranging from Crimean to Nogai Turkic groups. This fact underscores, once again, the ethnic heterogeneity of the Turkic population in the Astrakhan region, known collectively under the designation *Yurt Tatars*.

Conclusions

The analysis of various sources concerning the Yurt Tatars residing in the territory of the Lower Volga frontier leads to the conclusion that the ethno-

social structure of this Turkic population group was complex and heterogeneous (Yakushenkov & Yakushenkova, 2016). Over the course of its development from the 16th to the 19th centuries, the term *Yurt Tatars* evolved from an ethnonym into a generalized designation applied to the service strata of the Turkic population. In contemporary usage, however, the term has once again acquired a specifically ethnic meaning.

Tracing this evolution reveals that, in the 16th century, Yurt Tatars were mentioned in testimonies and archival records as a people distinguished from—and often contrasted with—the Nogais. By the 18th and 19th centuries, they had come to represent a service population whose murzas held authority over not only *sluzhilye* (serving) groups but also over *yasashnye* and *Emesh* categories of dependent people, whose precise ethnic origins remain unclear. It is possible that some among them were descendants of the indigenous population of the former Astrakhan Khanate. This hypothesis is supported by records indicating that a segment of the Yurt Tatars was engaged in economic activities such as gardening and fishing.

Consequently, it may be concluded that by the 18th century, the Yurt Tatars no longer constituted a unified or monolithic ethnic group with a clearly traceable origin, but rather comprised a mosaic of diverse ethnic and social strata. For this reason, scholarly attempts to classify the Yurt Tatars as belonging to a specific ethnic group appear to be unfounded.

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