

War Minister Sukhomlinov, proposing to take “immediate measures against Islām Khvāja’s autocratic rule”, and suggesting that the Khivan grand vizier be expelled from the Khanate. The Minister opted not to take action at this juncture – not because he had any particular faith in Sayyid Islām Khvāja, but because it appeared that other circumstances would render intervention unnecessary.¹⁸⁰ According to Russian doctors, who were treating Sayyid Islām Khvāja, the grand vizier was suffering from open-lung tuberculosis,¹⁸¹ and it would not be long before he died.¹⁸²

With the grand vizier thus owing his political survival to his imminent death, it is little wonder that there was an unsettled feeling in Khiva in the summer of 1913. Laffasī reports that shortly before his murder Sayyid Islām Khvāja shared with some of his confidants a disturbing dream he had had recently, in which he fell victim to a plot.¹⁸³ By August 1913, the situation in Khiva was redolent of a Chekhovian impending tragedy: the gun had already been placed onstage, and it was only a matter of time before it went off.

6. Death in the Darkness: Employing Criminal History Techniques

In order to reconstruct the chain of events related to Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s murder, we must turn our attention to the array of works written by Khivan authors who were contemporaries of the events in question, namely Ḥasan-Murād Laffasī, Bābājān Tarrāh, ‘Abdullāh Baltaev, and Pahlavān Niyāz Ḥājji Yusupov, all of whom accord attention to the episode. Before we proceed further, then, it is perhaps worth providing some details on these authors as well.

¹⁸⁰ RGVIA, f. 400, op. 262/912, d. 62, l. 155, cited from: A.S. Sadykov, *Rossia i Khiva v kontse XIX – nachale XX veka* (Tashkent: Fan, 1972), p. 141.

¹⁸¹ This information was reported by Lykoshin based upon his conversation with doctor Bogoliubov, the principal doctor of the ADO, who was treating the Khivan grand vizier, see Lykoshin, *Raport G. Turkestanскому General-gubernatoru, 30.09.1912, no 15*, l. 164.

¹⁸² Samsonov, G. *Ministru Inostrannykh Del. 11.11.1913*, l. 3 ob.

¹⁸³ Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshān*, fols. 39a–39b.

Hasan-Murād Laffasī (1880–1949), as noted above, during the years in question served as historian at the royal court in Khiva. In this capacity he authored an historical work entitled *Gulshan-i sa'ādat*, commissioned by and devoted to the reign of Isfandiyār Khān.¹⁸⁴ Written as it was to flatter the Khan, this work treats Sayyid Islām Khvāja's murder briefly and without much detail.¹⁸⁵ This is not the case, however, with another text by Laffasī entitled *Ta'rīkh-i gulshan*.¹⁸⁶ Although this was written around the same time as the *Gulshan-i sa'ādat*, it gives a very different account of the Khivan vizier's murder – and a very different assessment, also, of Isfandiyār Khān's reign.¹⁸⁷

Bābājān Tarrāh (1878–1971), our next author, similarly enjoyed a thriving career at the courtly world of the Khivan rulers as both a scribe and a poet.¹⁸⁸ In the early 20th century he was even tasked by Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān II with compiling a collection of biographies of the most notable contemporary poets who operated at the Khān's court. For some reason, however, Tarrāh was delayed in completing this work, and did not bring it to fruition until almost 50 years later, in 1967.¹⁸⁹ This delay meant that by the time of

¹⁸⁴ Hasan-Murād Laffasī, *Gulshan-i sa'ādat*, MS Tashkent, O'zFAShI, inv. no. 7797.

¹⁸⁵ Laffasī, *Gulshan-i sa'ādat*, fols. 18b–19a,

¹⁸⁶ See, Hasan-Murād Laffasī. *Ta'rīkh-i gulshan*. MS Tashkent, O'zFAShI, inv. no. 278. The events related to Sayyid Islām Khvāja's assassination are also covered by yet another piece by Laffasī, written presumably in the Soviet period, see: Hasan Madaminov (Hasan-Murād Laffasī), *Otryvki iz istorii Khivinskogo khanstva. Period 1910–1913 gg.*; O'zMA, f. I-125, op. 1, d. 609.

¹⁸⁷ The events related to Sayyid Islām Khvāja's murder covered on fols. 41b–45a.

¹⁸⁸ In Tarrāh own words, he served as a “special courtly poet” at the court of Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān II: see A. Atamurodova, O. Abdurahimov, “Bobojon Tarroh-Xodimning “Xorazm shoir va navozandalari” kitobi haqida so'z”, in A. Atamurodova, and O. Abdurahimov (eds.), Bobojon Tarroh Xodim, *Xorazm shoir va navozandalari* (Tashkent: Tafakkur qanoti, 2011), pp. 3–4.

¹⁸⁹ In more recent years two editions in Uzbek Cyrillic have been published: Bobojon Tarroh Azizov-Xodim, *Xorazm shoir va navozandalari. XIX asr oxiri–XX asr boshlarida Sayyid Muhammad Rahimxoni soniy davrida yashagan shoirlar haqida esdaliklar*, ed. Rahim Davlatyor (Tashkent: G'afur G'ulom nomidagi adabiyot va san'at nashriyoti, 1994); Bobojon Tarroh-Xodim, *Xorazm shoir va*

completion Tarrāh was thus describing a political environment that had come to an end several decades earlier, and was furthermore writing in a Soviet environment with ideological pressures of its own; perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, his treatment of the Khivan rulers Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān II and Isfandiyār Khān is distinctly unsympathetic. His anthology broadly comprises the biographies of 31 poets (including himself), most of whom appear to have been prominent officials at court;¹⁹⁰ the work therefore provides important information about political developments at the court, including those related to Sayyid Islām Khvāja's assassination.

Pahlavān (Pālvān) Hājīī Yusupov (1861–1936) was yet another direct participant in the political developments of the second decade of the 20th century. As a personal secretary to the afore-mentioned influential courtier Ḥusayn Murād Bāy Divānbīgī (the elder of the *Divanbegi*-ites), Yusupov seems to have been at the forefront of political developments, and to some extent shared the fate of his patron. In 1911, as a part of Isfandiyār Khān's retinue he accompanied his patron on his trip to the Russian imperial court at St. Petersburg; in 1912, upon the detainment of the *Divanbegi*-ites, he was also subjected to harassment by the authorities. In subsequent years, he together with Ḥusayn Murād Divānbīgī would remain at the helm of the Khivan reformist movement (*Yāsh Khivāliklār*), whose members would soon find themselves in opposition to the khanal regime. Yusupov remained a prominent figure in the Khorezmian political landscape even in the years after the fall of the Khan's regime in the newly emerged para-Bolshevik polity – the Khorezmian Soviet People Republic – which succeeded the Khivan Khanate in 1920. In

navozandalari, eds. A. Otamurodova and O. Abdurahimov (Tashkent: Tafakkur qanoti, 2011).

¹⁹⁰ On the courtly culture under the reign of Muḥammad Raḥīm Khān II, which saw deep engagement on the part of high-ranking officials in the art of poetry, see Aftandil Erkinov, "How Muhammad Rahim Khan II of Khiva (1864–1910) cultivated his Court Library as a Means of Resistance against the Russian Empire" *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 2 (2011): 36–49; Nuryogdi Tashev, "Zanimali Mukhammad-Yusuf Bayani dolzhnost' divan-begi?" *O'zbekiton tarixi* 2 (2009): 14–25.

1925–26 he penned an extended memoir under the conventional title “*Khāṭiralār*” (“Memories”), which offers *inter alia* a vivid account of the history of Khiva in the 1910s.¹⁹¹ While it contains a wealth of valuable information, Yusupov’s work is nevertheless most notable for its harsh criticism towards Isfandiyār Khān and some of his courtiers; this sense of animus colors the entire work and cannot be ignored.

The most prolific among this cohort of Khivan authors in terms of textual production was ‘Abdullāh Baltaev. His textual legacy embraces hundreds, if not thousands, of pages, most of which are organized in the form of copybooks or *daftars*, as he preferred to name them.¹⁹² Unlike the other afore-mentioned authors, he did not belong to the ranks of high-ranking courtiers, nor could he boast a noble provenance. Born in humble surroundings in the family of an ordinary craftsman, during the reign of Isfandiyār Khān he managed to gain prominence in the Khanate as a skillful architect and a dyer. In this capacity he worked on the construction of some of the most notable edifices of the time, such as the madrasa of Sayyid Islām Khvāja and the Nūrallāh-Bāy Palace.¹⁹³ Although his career trajectory was thus very different from that of other Khivan authors, like them he ended up engaged in what he called “the craft of history writing”. His textual legacy is very impressive indeed, embracing a

¹⁹¹ The single known manuscript of this work is currently in private hands in the province of Khorezm: Pahlavān Niyāz Hājji Yusupov, [*Khāṭiralār*]. MS Khiva, Private Collection of Anvar Otaboev, see further: M. Kh. Aliakberov, “O memuarakh Palvanniaza Iusupova” *ONU* 2 (1968): 71–74. In 2000 the Uzbek scholar M. Matniyozov published an edition of Yusupov’s text in Cyrillic Uzbek: see Polvonniyoz Hoji Yusupov, *Yosh xivaliklar tarixi (Xotiralar)*, ed. M. Matniyozov (Urgench: Xorazm nashriyoti, 1999).

¹⁹² For a fine-grained analysis of Baltaev’s textual legacy, see Nuryogdi Toshev, “Materialy Abdulla Baltaeva po istorii Khivinskogo khanstva: predvaritel’nye zamechaniia”, in D. Alimova and F. Schwarz (eds.), *Explorations in the Medieval and Modern History of Central Asia: Societies, Cultures, Texts* (Tashkent and Vienna: Akademnashr, 2019), pp. 76–91.

¹⁹³ K. Abdullaev, *Naqshlarga bitilgan umr: Abdulla Boltaevning hayoti va ijodiy faoliyati* (Tashkent: Gʻafur Gʻulom nomidagi adabiyot va sanʼat nashriyoti, 1995).

broad array of issues, from accounts of court politics to biographies of prominent individuals and ethnographic sketches on local habits and practices. Scattered as they are among numerous *daftars*, most of his works continue to this day to be in the private possession of his descendants and in occasional repositories.¹⁹⁴ For our present purposes, the most important of these works is *Khwārazm ta'rīkhīga matir'iallar*, in which he provides a highly detailed account of the murder plot and concomitant developments.¹⁹⁵

It is perhaps worth pausing to reflect on the matter of the *relations* among these sources. As we shall see further, certain details of Sayyid Islām Khvāja's assassination as narrated by our authors coincide with one another. This is not to say, however, that they are necessarily repeating each other or that there are clear-cut inter-connections between those texts. Laffasī, as an official court chronicler, seems to have enjoyed greater access to inside information¹⁹⁶ or at least he seems to have been well aware about the rumors circulating in remote corners of the Khivan royal palace. The same is to a certain extent true of Yusupov, who could have had access to the confidential information, owing to his closeness to certain eminent courtiers of the time, such as his patron Ḥusayn Bāy Divānbīgī, or Mat-Vafā Bakkalov. In their privileged access to materials, both Laffasī and Yusupov thus differ from Baltaev, who due to his humbler origin was less well connected at court. Written as it was several decades after the fall of Qonghrat rule, Baltaev's account of the events in question conveys what can be labeled perhaps as common knowledge, which is to say the rumors and stories that were circulating among the inhabitants of Khiva.

¹⁹⁴ An overview of Baltaev's *daftars*, which are currently in the possession of Odilbek Abdulaev (Khiva, Uzbekistan); see also Toshev, "Materialy Abdulla Baltaeva po istorii Khivinskogo khanstva," pp. 76–91.

¹⁹⁵ 'Abdullāh Baltaev, *Khwārazm ta'rīkhīga matir'iallar*, Khīva 1950. MS Tashkent, O'zFASHI, Tashkent, inv. no. 9320.

¹⁹⁶ Thus, for instance, Laffasī provides very accurate data – regarding both timing and content – of Lykoshin's negotiation with the Khivan Khan, the details of which hardly could have been available to the broader public.

Apart from the fact that all these texts were produced in Khiva, and that they were written by contemporaries – and to a certain extent even eyewitnesses – of the events in question, what they have in common is the fact that most of them (except for Laffasi's work) were compiled during the mid-Soviet era, soon after the death of Stalin; as such, they clearly reflect the imprint of Soviet-era ideology, premised above all else on the idea of class conflict. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that all of them attribute the orchestration of Sayyid Islām Khvāja's assassination to Isfandiyār Khān himself.

Another salient source which provides a distinct perspective on the events in question is a detailed report written by the Turkestan Governor-General A. Samsonov to Sergey Dmitrievich Sazonov, then the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs (in office: 1910–1916). In the text, written soon after the murder had been committed, Samsonov provides his own reconstruction of events. In doing so, he heavily relies on the information reported by Nil Lykoshin as well as other sorts of what he calls “undercover information” (*neglasnykh dannykh agenturnogo kharaktera*), which the latter obtained through his informants at the Khivan court.¹⁹⁷

Although we can admit that some of the aforementioned Khivan authors and Lykoshin may have relied on the same chains of information circulating in and around the Khivan court, we are nevertheless safe to exclude their possible acquaintance with each other's texts. This is especially true of the Russian officer's reports, for being written under the labels “Confidential” and or “Highly Confidential” (*Sovershenno sekretno*), the latter texts clearly had a restricted circulation even among colonial officials, let alone the aforementioned Khivan authors.

Following this overview of the available sources and their authors, let us now go back to consider how events in Khiva unfolded. We left our story at the point where relations were deteriorating between Isfandiyār Khān and his grand vizier, largely due to the two

¹⁹⁷ A.V. Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, 11.11.1913; O'zMA, f. I-2, op. 1, d. 343, l. 1 ob.

men's growing disagreement about the use of treasury resources.¹⁹⁸ Sayyid Islām Khvāja's plan to limit Isfandiyār Khān's expenditure on "personal needs" to a fixed monthly allowance seems to have irritated the Khān beyond measure.¹⁹⁹ According to Samsonov's account, during one particularly stormy encounter Isfandiyār Khān yelled at his grand vizier: "Let me not be Khan of Khiva if I don't kill you'!" (*ne bud'ia Khan Khivinskii, esli ne unichtozhu tebia*).²⁰⁰ The grand vizier, in his turn, threatened the Khan that if he did not cease wasting money on debauchery and womanizing (*jalaḥbāzlik*), the vizier would replace Isfandiyār with one of his brothers on the Khivan throne.²⁰¹

Soon thereafter, the reports go, the convoy of guards (*nūkar*) which usually escorted Sayyid Islām Khvāja on his rides was dismissed. Somewhat surprisingly, the guards were dismissed at the grand vizier's personal request. The Russian administration's informants provide some explanations for such an unexpected move. According to the Russian account, Isfandiyār Khān mocked the grand vizier's reluctance to go anywhere without an armed escort and challenged him to cease this habit. Pricked by such mockery, Sayyid Islām Khvāja decided to stop having the escort with him wherever he went.²⁰²

On the evening of 9 August 1913 Sayyid Islām Khvāja completed his routine business at the Khan's Nūrallāh-Bāy Palace and was about to head off to his residence in the Khivan suburb of Tāza-Bāgh. Baltaev recounts that on that evening his personal guard, a certain Bābā Jān Qātfān, asked his patron's permission to remain in the city, as he had been invited for a social gathering (*zīyāfat*) by

¹⁹⁸ Laffāsī, *Ta'rikh-i gulshan*, fols. 40–40b; Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, II. 5 ob.–6; Baltaev, *Khvārazm ta'rikhiga matir'iallar*, fols. 4b–5a; Pahlavān Niyāz Ḥājji Yusupov, *Khāṭiralar*, fols. 20b–21b.

¹⁹⁹ Baltaev, *Khvārazm ta'rikhiga matir'iallar*, fol. 5a; Laffāsī, *Ta'rikh-i gulshan*, fol. 40b.

²⁰⁰ Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, I. 6 ob.

²⁰¹ Laffāsī, *Ta'rikh-i gulshan*, fol. 40 a.

²⁰² Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, I. 3; see also: Bobojon Tarroh Xodim, *Xorazm shoir va navozandalari*, p. 77.

a courtier called ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram.²⁰³ (Let us bear this latter name in mind, for ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram seems to have played a noticeable role in what happened later.) The Russian administration’s informers similarly reported that Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s personal guard and coachman had been replaced at short notice.²⁰⁴

In the meantime, there was another noticeable circumstance which surrounded Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s last journey. The road from the Nūrallāh-Bāy Palace to the Tāza-Bāgh estate ran along a relatively bustling track, which was usually lit up at night. On that night, however, the streetlights along the road appear to have been unlit, and street guards were instructed not to allow wayfarers to approach the road on the pretext that on that night the Khan’s harem would be moving to his summer residence in the same locality of Tāza-Bāgh.²⁰⁵

Thus “two hours after sunset” on the evening of 9 August 1913 Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s carriage set off from the Nūrallāh-Bāy Palace for his estate in Tāza-Bāgh along the road bearing the same name. The malefactors in the meantime seem to have set up an ambush near where the track passed the Ūghlān ‘Azīz Bābā cemetery.²⁰⁶ Reports vary about how many assailants there were. Baltaev reports that there were four of them, whereas Samsonov suggests that their number exceeded a dozen, although only a few of these actually took part in the attack.²⁰⁷ Baltaev recounts that when ambushing the carriage one of the perpetrators took hold of the horses, another one stabbed the coachman with a knife, and two others dragged Sayyid

²⁰³ Baltaev, *Khwārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fol. 5b; Laffasī version slightly differs; he reports that Bābā Jān Qātfān was detached from his patron because he was given false information about his patron’s schedule, Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 43b.

²⁰⁴ Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, l. 3.

²⁰⁵ Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 43b; Baltaev, *Khwārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fol. 5b.

²⁰⁶ Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fols. 43a–43b; Baltaev, *Khwārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fol. 6a.; Yusupov, *Khāṭiralar*, fol. 21b.

²⁰⁷ Baltaev, *Khwārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fol. 6a.; Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, l. 3 ob.

Islām Khvāja out of his carriage onto the road. We omit here the gruesome details of the murder;²⁰⁸ suffice it to note that the injuries sustained would have been lethal to anyone. The perpetrators then fled the scene, leaving the grand vizier’s valuables untouched; the only item that they took, apparently, was Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s sheepskin hat (*chugirma*). According to local belief, Samsonov noted, the presence of the victim’s *chugirma* at the crime scene could have helped the interrogation to trace the perpetrators: “[t]he Khivans believe”, Samsonov further reported to the imperial ministers, “... once the interrogators have got a *chugirma*, it would be sufficient to burn a small piece of the hat’s fur so as to make the culprit[s] come to the house of the murdered party and confess to their crimes”.²⁰⁹

The funeral took place the following morning. In the meantime, not only had the coachman managed to survive but he was able to identify one of the perpetrators, a certain Qūrbān Niyāz Būzchī, who, he further stated, was the one who actually committed the murder.²¹⁰ While various accounts of the episode agree that the coachman named Qūrbān Niyāz Būzchī was the lead assailant, they differ as to exactly who this person was. According to Samsonov, Qūrbān Niyāz Būzchī was a subordinate of Shaykh Nazar Bāy Yasāvulbāshī, whom we previously noted as one of the *Divanbegi*-ites and who earlier had been detained by Sayyid Islām Khvāja. Samsonov’s identification is not substantiated, however, by any of the Khivan authors, who deny that Shaykh Nazar Bāy had any involvement in the murder – although judging from their accounts he may at least have been aware of the plot. According to Laffasī, Tarrāh and Baltaev, it was Isfandiyār Khān himself who orchestrated the killing, and initially planned to entrust responsibility for

²⁰⁸ The description of the wounds inflicted on Sayyid Islām Khvāja can be found in Baltaev, *Khvārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fol. 6a.; Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 44a; Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, I, 3 ob.

²⁰⁹ Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, II, 3 ob.–4.

²¹⁰ Baltaev, *Khvārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fol. 6 ob.; Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, II, 4 ob.–5.

carrying out the murder to Shaykh Nazar Bāy. This latter agreed to act as the Khān instructed but made clear that he would do so only in an outright and visible fashion, rather than engaging in cloak-and-dagger skullduggery. “My Lord”, he is supposed to have said, “I would readily execute your order and commit Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s murder, but only when Khvāja is in your presence and the respective order from your side is given outrightly.”²¹¹ That Shaykh Nazar Bāy was exercised not so much at the idea of killing Sayyid Islām Khvāja as at the idea of *doing so in secret* seems to reflect a certain ethical code of courtly life that accepted the permissibility of killing political opponents provided that this be done openly rather than in a conspiratorial fashion.

The Khivan authors furthermore deny the suggestion that the afore-mentioned Qūrbān Niyāz Būzchī may have been related to Shaykh Nazar Bāy. According to their version, the former was “a man” of ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram,²¹² another courtier whom we encountered above as the organizer of the social gathering (*zīyāfat*) that resulted in the absence of Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s personal guard on the night of the attack. Apart from being a close confidant of Isfandiyār Khān, ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram also appears to have been the cousin of the ruler (*dāyisīnī ūghlī*).²¹³ It also does not seem to be a mere coincidence that soon after Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s murder ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram was promoted to the position of *yasāvulbāshī*.²¹⁴

Laffasī and Baltaev in the meantime provide further details of the plot. ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram, after being instructed by Isfandiyār Khān to kill Sayyid Islām Khvāja “discreetly”, recruited some other individuals to take part in the conspiracy, including the

²¹¹ The details of the conversation, with slight variations, can be found in: Bob-ojon Tarroh Xodim, *Xorazm shoir va navozandalari*, p. 77; Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fols. 41b–42a; Baltaev, *Khvārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fol. 5a.

²¹² Baltaev, *Khvārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fol. 6b; Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 42b.

²¹³ Baltaev, *Khvārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fol. 5a; Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 52b.

²¹⁴ Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 52b.

aforementioned Qūrbān Niyāz Būzchī.²¹⁵ The fact that these authors attribute responsibility for the murder to ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram suggests that the latter is indeed a likely suspect. By this same logic, it is also likely that Isfandiyār Khān was himself the driving force behind the plot.

Given that the coachman was the one surviving witness of the attack, it is unsurprising that the authorities had to act on his testimony – particularly since said testimony was furthermore given publicly and in the presence of Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s relatives. Qūrbān Niyāz Būzchī was detained soon thereafter, and formal hearings were arranged by the Khivan authorities. Baltaev provides detailed descriptions of a public interrogation that took place in the central square in Khiva. On the designated day Qūrbān Niyāz Būzchī was brought forth before the Kuhna Arq Palace in front of a large gathering, including laypeople from surrounding villages as well as high-ranking officials and *‘ulamā*. The interrogation seems to have been intended as a piece of theater, to demonstrate the authorities’ eagerness to get to the bottom of a case in which they in fact were deeply implicated. But the two guards (*pashshāb*) who carried out the interrogation appear to have been unaware of this purely performative aim: having tied Būzchī’s hands, they started brutally lashing him with whips, demanding that he name his accomplices. Evidently having expected reasonably light treatment, Būzchī now found that the *pashshābs* were more vigorous with their whipping than he had anticipated; unable to endure such torture any further, he screamed at ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram, who was presiding over the ceremony: “*Yasāvulbāshī*, my lord, if you are to make me a scapegoat, then I shall reveal the truth!”. Scared at this ominous warning, ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram gave instructions for the interrogation to be terminated, on the specious grounds that the case was so sensitive that it should be investigated only in the presence of the Khan. This excuse evidently failed to convince people, and

²¹⁵ Baltaev, *Khwārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fols. 5a–5b.; Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fols. 42b–43a.

thus, writes Baltaev, “those covert matters came to become evident to the people”.²¹⁶ Although no other source directly confirms that the interrogation proceeded in this fashion, there is other evidence that supports Baltaev’s conclusion. Samsonov, for instance, in his reports also refers to the fact that everyone in Khiva was certain that the murder was committed by “a certain Qūrbān Bāy [Būzchī]”, who upon detention “presented a dagger” as “a sort of warrant attesting that he executed the order from above”.²¹⁷

If we ourselves were to lead a criminal investigation into Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s murder, the aforementioned evidence would very likely warrant our charging Qūrbān Niyāz Būzchī as the probable perpetrator of the murder. ‘Abd al-Karīm Maḥram, Isfandiyār Khān’s confidant and kinsman, would feature also in our investigatory logs as a probable organizer of the crime. We would furthermore also have a few leads ultimately linking the crime to Isfandiyār Khān. In deference to due process, though, we should of course acknowledge that this evidence is somewhat circumstantial and would probably fail to secure conviction.

Let us try, perhaps, to look at the situation from another angle in order to address the question of *cui bono* – that is, who may have stood to benefit from the grand vizier’s death. The first such group of people were the members of the *Divanbegi*-ite faction. These were individuals who had recently been deprived of much of their economic and political capital due to Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s intrigues and would have had good reason for wanting to get vengeance on their long-term rival. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, in the wake of the murder there were some rumors that attributed Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s murder directly to this group, ascribing responsibility to Shaykh Nazar Bāy Yasāvulbāshī. Let us try however to consider whether the members of this group actually had sufficient resources and authority to commit the murder of the mighty vizier, and whether his death actually yielded any advantages for them.

²¹⁶ Baltaev, *Khwārazm ta’rīkhīga matir’iallar*, fols. 7–7 ob.

²¹⁷ Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, l. 6 ob.

Over the months following their pardon in December 1912, the sons of Mat-Murād Divānbīgī enjoyed little improvement in their day-to-day fortunes. Even though the Khan reappointed them to the former positions that they had occupied before they fell into disfavor, they “gained no fruits whatsoever”.²¹⁸ Nor do we find any indications of improvement in their position in the aftermath of the grand vizier’s death, which they would have expected had they been directly involved in the conspiracy. Quite the contrary, in fact: in September 1914 a Russian officer observed that “the *Divanbegi*-ites do not enjoy any noteworthy role at the court and only on rare occasions are they entrusted with [minor] errands by the Khan”.²¹⁹ The same to a larger extent was true of their attempt to secure restitution of the confiscated fortune that had been previously in their possession. As late as 1915 the new ADO Commandant Kolosovskii reported that despite repeated demands by high-ranking Russian imperial officials including Ministers of War and the Foreign Affairs, the *Divanbegi*-ites had not yet been granted possession of their confiscated properties.²²⁰ Given their evidently limited authority and scarce financial resources, could the *Divanbegi*-ites have instigated a large-scale conspiracy against this powerful courtier – and, more importantly, have gotten away with it? It seems unlikely. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, there is nothing in any of the accounts by Khivan contemporary authors to suggest that the *Divanbegi*-ites had any involvement in the murder plot. Some authors such as Yusupov and Babaniyazov furthermore claim that the spread of rumors about Shaykh Nazar Bāy’s involvement in the murder plot was part of the Khan’s strategy to mislead investigation.²²¹

²¹⁸ Samsonov, *G. Ministru Inostrannykh Del*, ll. 2–2 ob.

²¹⁹ Troshkin, *Raport G. Turkestanskomu General-gubernatoru*, 26.09.1914, no. 20; OʻzMA, f. I-2, op. 1, d. 369, l. 22 ob.

²²⁰ Kolosovskii, *Dokladnaia Zapiska General-maioru Geppeneru*, 04.08.1915, no. 333, l. 97 ob.

²²¹ Yusupov, *Khāṭiralar*, fol. 22b; Babaniyazov, *Isfandiyār Khān davrinīng vāqiʻalārī*, fol. 13a.

There are, however, two other individuals whom the Khivan authors do mention as possible suspects, who not only may have had good reason to want to get rid of the mighty vizier but also seem to have greatly benefited from his eventual riddance. One of these figures was an individual called Muḥammad Vafā Karavānbāshī (Mat-Vafā Bakkalov), and the other was someone called ‘Ashūr Maḥram, whom we have already encountered.²²²

Mat-Vafā Bakkalov (d. 1916) was an industrialist, owning a number of cotton-processing plants and other commercial ventures, and was one of the richest people in the Khivan Khanate.²²³ Following Isfandiyār Khān’s accession to power, Bakkalov frequently acted for him as his personal agent in St. Petersburg.²²⁴ Through both his economic and his diplomatic activities Bakkalov was clearly well-acquainted with various high-ranking officials in the metropole,²²⁵ and he used these acquaintances to negotiate sensitive matters, on occasion doing so over the head of the colonial authorities in Turkestan.²²⁶ ‘Ashūr Maḥram (d. 1918), meanwhile, maintained a far lower profile, preferring to conduct himself in a secretive manner; indeed, documents reveal little evidence of his presence in the Khivan court. Nevertheless, he was a close confidant of Isfandiyār Khān, winning his trust as a discreet accomplice in the Khān’s notorious “carnal pleasures”.²²⁷ The more the Khan had to lean on

²²² Laffāsī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fols. 51a, 39b–40a; Yusupov, *Khātīralar*, fol. 23b; Bobojon Tarroh-Xodim, *Xorazm shoir va navozandalari*, p. 78.

²²³ Niiazmatov, *Poisk konsensusa*, pp. 393–394.

²²⁴ See *Janucka*, pp. 141, 152.

²²⁵ Yusupov, *Khātīralar*, fols. 23b–24b.

²²⁶ In 1914–1915 Bakkalov for instance was able to secure, against all odds and in the face of fierce opposition from the Turkestan authorities, Russian government approval for the delivery of 3,000 rifles to Khiva, see Yusupov, *Khātīralar*, fol. 23b; Niiazmatov, *Poisk konsensusa*, pp. 406–408.

²²⁷ The Khivan authors state that ‘Ashūr Maḥram was responsible for delivering young ladies to the Khan’s harem. For that purpose, ‘Ashūr Maḥram had under his command a number of female confidantes (*khātūn maḥram*), whom he instructed to take the girls, sometimes against their parents’ will, from their paternal houses, see, Laffāsī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fols. 36a, 39b; Babaniyazov, *Isfandiyār Khān davrining vāqi‘alārī*, fol. 17b. The rumors about Isfandiyār

his confidant in his covert affairs, the more ‘Ashūr Maḥram’s ambitions thrived – to the point where, as Laffasī recounts, these ambitions came onto conflict with those of the grand vizier.²²⁸ Initially the political ambitions of both Mat-Vafā Bakkalov and ‘Ashūr Maḥram were confined to their respective spheres of activity. But with the *Divabegi*-ites’ fall from grace and Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s subsequent murder both men seem to have reached the apex of their authority.

Indeed, with regard to the question *cui bono*, both Mat-Vafā Bakkalov and ‘Ashūr Maḥram seem to have benefited from Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s death. Soon after the murder Bakkalov was promoted to Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s former position as grand-vizier,²²⁹ while ‘Ashūr Maḥram was assigned to the office of the chief treasurer and chief of the *maḥrams* (*maḥram-bāshī*).²³⁰ The Khivan authors further state that both individuals received a share of the financial resources that had previously belonged to Sayyid Islām Khvāja and his kinsmen.²³¹

There are still a number of question marks around Sayyid Islām Khvāja’s assassination. One of them regards the reaction of the Russian authorities over the months following the events in Khiva. In order to get to the bottom of the case, as we know, the Russian imperial court dispatched a commission led by General Sergey Tseil, the Chief of the Asiatic Department of the Russian General Staff, then the principal governmental body in charge of governing over

Khān’s secret passion do not seem to be completely ungrounded. One of the causes of the large-scale resistance that broke out in various parts of Khorezm in early 1916 was the accusation that the Khan’s disgraceful actions had ruined the reputation of young ladies across the Khanate, see: Yusupov, *Khāṭiralar*, fol. 29b.; O. Qo’shjonov, and N. Polvonov. *Xorazmdagi ijtimoiy-siyosiy jarayonlar va harakatlar* (Tashkent: Abu Matbuot Konsalt, 2007), pp. 220–221.

²²⁸ Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 55a.

²²⁹ Yusupov, *Khāṭiralar*, fol. 23b; Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 55a; Babaniyazov, *Isfandiyār Khān davrinīng vāqi’alārī*, fol. 13a.

²³⁰ Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 51b.

²³¹ Laffasī, *Ta’rīkh-i gulshan*, 53a; Yusupov, *Khāṭiralar*, fol. 27b; see also Niazmatov, *Poisk konsensusa*, pp. 390–391.

Russia's "Asiatic colonies". Given the proliferation of information which circulated in Khiva, undercover intelligence gathered by the colonial officers, and the coachman's eyewitness testimony, it is somewhat surprising that the commission was unable to track down any leads.²³² Our Khivan chroniclers, however, suggest one reason why the commission proved so ineffective. According to their report, the Khivan authorities paid the commission members a substantial bribe in the form of cash and valuables to keep things quiet.²³³ They furthermore recount that the people who delivered these bribes were Mat-Vafā Bakkalov and his younger brother 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bāy Bakkalov, who handed over valuables in person.²³⁴ We might simply disregard this suggestion as unfounded speculation, were it not that 'Abd al-Raḥmān Bāy actually admitted acting thus: a few years later, in the context of another matter, he acknowledged to the *Okhranka*, or Russian secret police, that he had indeed distributed money and valuables to various Russian officials, at both the colonial and the all-imperial level, on behalf of his elder brother and Isfandiyār Khān himself.²³⁵

One other person who emerges in a somewhat questionable light from this episode is Colonel Lykoshin himself: charged as he was to keep a close watch over political developments in the Khanate, he failed not only to prevent Sayyid Islām Khvāja's murder but also to identify the malefactors. Surprisingly, though, these failures did little to hamper his career: indeed, soon afterwards he was promoted

²³² Qo'shjonov, Polvonov, *Xorazmdagi ijtimoiy-siyosiy jarayonlar*, p. 214; Nii-azmatov, *Poisk konsensusa*, p. 387.

²³³ Laffasī, *Ta' rīkh-i gulshan*, fol. 51a; Babaniyazov, *Isfandiyār Khān davrinīng vāqi 'alārī*, fol. 13b; Baltaev and Yusupov specify the amount of sum – 40,000 roubles (*manāt*) – spent by Isfandiyār Khān in the form of pay-offs to the commission's members: see Baltaev, *Khvārazm ta' rīkhīga matir'iallar*, fols. 7b–8a; Yusupov, *Khātiralar*, fol. 22b.; Babaniyazov, *Isfandiyār Khān davrinīng vāqi 'alārī*, fol. 13b; see also: Qo'shjonov, Polvonov, *Xorazmdagi ijtimoiy-siyosiy jarayonlar*, p. 214.

²³⁴ Yusupov, *Khātiralar*, fol. 22b.

²³⁵ *Protokol doprosa Abdurakhmana Bakkalova*; O'zMA, f. I-461, op. 1, d. 1889-a, ll. 200–201 ob.