In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the elevation of Bukhara’s social and religious status within Muslim society in Russia stemmed in large measure from the sacred status that Central Asia already enjoyed and that was evident in Tatar and Bashkir legends, genealogies, and Sufi tradition. The sacred bonds between Central Asia and Muslims in Russia are of considerable antiquity. Moreover, Sufi tradition, which Tatars and Bashkirs understood in large measure to have originated in Central Asia, permeated Islamic practice throughout the Islamic world, emphasizing rituals such as hagiolatry and pilgrimage, which were also important factors in reinforcing the connections between Central Asia and Muslim communities in Russia. Following the Mongol conquests the close political, ethnic, and kinship ties between the Volga-Ural region and Siberia on the one hand, and Central Asia on the other, served to amplify Bukhara’s Sufi legacy among Muslims in Russia.

If religious and especially Sufi conceptions constituted the foundation for Bukhara’s sacred status among Muslims in Russia, the shifting economic and social relationship between Central Asians and Muslims in Russia further amplified it. As late as the First World War a Russian Orthodox missionary in Siberia complained of the extraordinary religious influence and authority Siberian Bukharans still exerted over native Siberian Tatars. This missionary, exhibiting the islamophobia that was common in late Imperial Russia, blamed this influence and authority on eighteenth century Russian state policies that granted broad privileges to the ancestors of these Siberian Bukharans, and argued that the elevation of their legal and communal status led to a rise in their religious authority among the Siberian Tatars. In fact, as early as the 1590’s it had been Muscovite policy to stimulate trade with Central Asia, and this policy was reemphasized beginning in the reign of Peter the Great (r. 1689-1725), and maintained well into the reign of Nicholas I (r. 1825-1855). Until the

eighteenth century this trade was mainly conducted through Siberia and Astrakhan, following trade routes that long predated the Russian conquests. Expanding trade with the Central Asian khanates was also one of Peter the Great’s policy ambitions, and he put into motion numerous initiatives that would redirect trade between Central Asia and Russia to a series of Russian outposts along the northern rim of the Qazaq steppe.\(^2\)

One of the methods to attract Central Asian caravans was to grant them generous privileges, eventually making Central Asian merchants among the most privileged estate groups in the entire Russian empire. The Muscovite authorities had in fact begun granting these privileges to Bukharans in Siberia at the beginning of the seventeenth century, but in the eighteenth century they were broadly expanded to virtually all Central Asian merchants living in Orenburg, Petropavlovsk, Semipalatinsk, and other settlements along the Russian fortified lines along the northern Qazaq Steppe. The settlement of wealthy and influential Central Asians in Russia, and the increasing volume of travel of Tatar and Bashkir merchants to Central Asia intensified contacts between the groups. Furthermore, the extension of substantial privileges to Central Asian merchants in the eighteenth century took place at a time when the Russian authorities were broadly diminishing the privileges of native Muslim elites in the Volga-Ural region, thereby increasing the contrast between the groups’ respective levels of status. Marxist historians have, with some justification, characterized the eighteenth century as the period of the collapse of the old Tatar feudal elites, and the rise of Tatar merchant capital; however the decline in status and privilege affected not only the gentry, but many peasants as well. Beginning in the Petrine era formerly tribute-paying communities of Muslim peasants were becoming state peasants, or were being resettled and saddled with new labor obligations.\(^3\) In 1713 the Muslim gentry was

\(^2\) R.G. Bukanova has examined in detail the Petrine origins of the trading forts in Bashkoria and along the Qazaq steppe, which became the main venues for trade between Russia and Central Asia; cf. her Goroda-kreposti iugo-vostoka Rossii v XVIII veke, (Ufa, 1997); the cities of the Irtysh line in Siberia, including Semipalatinsk also date from the Petrine era; cf. Kh. Z. Ziaev, Ekonomicheskie sviiazii Srednei Azii s Sibir'yu v XVI-XIX vv. (Tashkent, 1983), 83-100; cf. also P.I. Rychkov, Istoriia Orenburgskaja 2nd ed. (Orenburg, 1896), 2-5; A. Popov, Snosheniia Rossi s Khivoiu i Bukharioiu pri Petre Velikom, (St. Petersburg, 1853).

\(^3\) For a broad and detailed discussion of progress of Russian legal policy regarding Muslim communities cf. Aidar Nogmanov, Samoderzhavie i tatary, (Kazan, 2005); cf. also F. Kh. Gumerov, ed. Zakony Rossiiiskoi imperii o bashkirakh, mishiarakh, teptiarihakh, i bobbyliakh, (Ufa, 1999).