

LAND PLOTS, AGRICULTURE, AND EMERGING ISSUES IN SAMARKAND REGION (LATE 19TH – EARLY 20TH CENTURY)

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Abstract

This article explores the operations of the Department of Land and State Property established in Turkestan in 1897, with particular emphasis on its activities within Samarkand region. The study provides a detailed examination of the structure and distribution of land plots, the specific characteristics of local agricultural practices, the development of irrigation systems, and the institutional measures implemented to manage the region's agrarian potential. Drawing upon archival documents and statistical data, the author highlights both the achievements and the persistent challenges in this domain.

Keywords: Department of Land and State Property of Turkestan, desyatina, land, irrigation system, Mirzachul, rice, agriculture.

Introduction

The Samarkand region was one of the key administrative units within the Turkestan Governor-Generalship and held particular strategic significance. Its formation was based on a special Regulation on the Administration of the Turkestan Territory, officially approved on January 1, 1887, in accordance with the provisions of Volume II of the Compendium of Civil Laws (1892 edition). This legal act established the administrative and legal framework for governance in the region and laid the foundation for the formal creation of the Samarkand region [1]. According to the administrative division, the Samarkand region comprised four districts: Samarkand, Kattakurgan, Khodjant, and Jizzakh [2].

Following its establishment, the region saw a more active and systematic implementation of the land acquisition policy, which was one of the central objectives of colonial administration. Oversight of land resources was carried out by the Department of Land and State Property of Turkestan, established in 1897. This institution was responsible for managing the irrigation system, overseeing forestry activities, conducting explorations and testing for natural resources. In addition, it organized the operation of agricultural educational institutions, including schools of hydraulic engineering, hydrometry, horticulture, and viticulture [2].

The establishment of this institution enabled the imposition of control over all natural resources within the region. Over the course of two decades, the Department also implemented a broad policy agenda in the Samarkand region, operating within the scope of its official authority. However, the agency's activities were not without significant shortcomings—most notably in the realm of newly cultivated land development.

In 1912, a working project was initiated for the years 1913–1915, aimed at gathering detailed information on available land in the Samarkand region. It was anticipated that during this period, all unclaimed plots situated in the central part of the region would be surveyed. According to these initial projections, the total area designated for study amounted to 1,100,000 desyatinas, of which up to 300,000 desyatinas were expected to be examined by 1915. However, it was later discovered that, in addition to this extensive territory, there were also 386 surveyed land parcels requiring investigation—areas that had previously been classified as part of the nomadic zone [1].

The data provided by K.K. Palen, who conducted an inspection of the territory and the activities of the Department of Land and State Property in Turkestan during 1908–1909, is also of considerable importance.

According to his findings, the total area of the Samarkand region amounted to 8,289,128 desyatinas. Of this, the urban portion occupied 15,997 desyatinas; lands owned by the local population accounted for 2,221,113 desyatinas; privately owned land totaled 1,415 desyatinas; Russian nomads held 22,907 desyatinas; state-owned lands classified as taxable plots comprised 59,936 desyatinas; and forested areas covered 3,914,086 desyatinas. Altogether, these categories amounted to 6,235,454 desyatinas. The remaining 2,053,674 desyatinas were recognized as lands used by nomadic communities on a permanent and indefinite basis [1].

In the Samarkand region, the available land was allocated for various types of cultivated crops. According to data provided by I.I. Geyer, the distribution of sown areas by crop type across the districts of the region was as follows:

In the Samarkand district: Land allocated for cotton amounted to 5,500 desyatinas; for wheat — 95,000 desyatinas; for barley — 46,000 desyatinas; and for rice — 29,000 desyatinas.

In the Jizzakh district: Cotton occupied 800 desyatinas; wheat — 71,000 desyatinas; and barley — 17,000 desyatinas.

In the Khodjent district: Cotton fields covered 4,000 desyatinas; wheat — 27,000 desyatinas; barley — 6,000 desyatinas; and rice — 1,400 desyatinas.

In the Kattakurgan district: Land under cotton cultivation reached 8,000 desyatinas; wheat — 22,000 desyatinas; barley — 6,000 desyatinas; and rice — 1,200 desyatinas.

Across the entire region, this amounted to a total of 18,300 desyatinas allocated for cotton, 215,000 desyatinas for wheat, 75,000 desyatinas for barley, and 32,000 desyatinas for rice cultivation [1].

Within the provinces of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship, a distinctive ranking emerged based on the types of crops and their respective cultivated areas. Wheat occupied the leading position in terms of sown area, covering more than half of all agricultural land, with figures ranging from 2,712,260 to 1,404,788 desyatinas. The Syrdarya region was the foremost producer of wheat, followed by the Samarkand region in second place, and the Fergana region in third. Cotton ranked second, with a total cultivated area of 523,674 hectares. The distribution of cotton fields across the provinces was as follows: approximately 7.6% of the total cotton area was located in the Syrdarya region, nearly 40% (39.7%) in the Fergana region, about 7.9% in the Samarkand region, and 32% in the Caspian region. Barley held the third position, with 259,902 desyatinas, the largest portion of which was cultivated in the Samarkand region. Oats came fourth, covering 176,867 hectares within the region. Rice ranked fifth, with a cultivated area totaling 153,448 hectares [2].

The data provided by M. Virskii, secretary of the Statistical Committee of the Samarkand region in 1907, places particular emphasis on rice cultivation among the various types of crops grown in the region. "In the Nauskin volost, remarkable changes were observed over the past two years (i.e., in 1899–1900). The area under rice cultivation expanded dramatically from 392 desyatinas to 2,000 desyatinas. The exact reason for this substantial increase in rice fields within the Khodjent district remains unclear to me; however, according to some reports from the local population, the recent expansion of rice planting in Nauskin volost is linked to the impact of locusts. In the previous two years, this pestilence nearly completely destroyed all autumn and spring crops, forcing the land to be plowed anew. Among the late replanted field crops, rice was particularly widely cultivated, especially the 'Arpa-sholi' variety. In the Samarkand region, four varieties of rice are commonly grown: Arpa-sholi, Ok-sholi, Kyzyl-sholi, and Kora-kalyk" [3].

In the Samarkand region, the 1912 harvest of winter wheat ranged from average to below average. A rich yield of winter wheat was recorded only in the Kattakurgan district and partially in the Jizzakh district. In many areas, the harvest from spring crops was low, whereas in the Khodjent district it was deemed satisfactory. Rice cultivation in 1912 covered an area of 45,000 hectares. The primary rice-growing areas were the Samarkand, Kattakurgan, and Khodjent districts [1].

Another widely cultivated crop in the region was tobacco, as reported by K.K. Palen. Tobacco farming was highly developed in the areas around Kattakurgan, near Bukhara, as well as on the irrigated lands along the lower reaches of the Zarafshan River [1].

It is important to highlight another significant aspect: the natural climatic conditions continually influenced agricultural activities. The Land and State Property Administration in Turkestan faced challenges such as insufficient rainfall and massive locust infestations. In areas experiencing water shortages, sources indicate that priority was given either to livestock farming or to arable agriculture utilizing fallow lands. In regions such as

Gulakandoz, Khodjent, and Naytut-Kypchak, nomadic pastoralism predominated due to inadequate irrigation [2].

From this, it can be concluded that irrigation required particular attention within the territory of the region. The Main Administration of Land and State Property in Turkestan also undertook numerous initiatives in this regard. Especially significant was the issue of irrigating newly cultivated lands. This is evidenced by the report of the Chief of Irrigation of the Samarkand Region, P. Petrovsky, addressed to the military governor of the Samarkand Region, Ya. D. Fedorov, dated December 30, 1897, which emphasized the necessity of studying ancient irrigation structures:

“Since 1895, under the directive of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property, a research team of three technical specialists has been operating in the Samarkand Region, focusing on the irrigation of new lands. Currently, in 1897, two members of this team are engaged in leveling the terrain in the Mirzachul area, while the third is working in the Khodjent district in the regions of the Khodjabakirgan, Aksu, and Shakhristan rivers, where traces of former artificial constructions remain, aimed at building reservoirs.

In addition to the rivers mentioned, investigations conducted so far have revealed remnants of artificial structures, and in some places intact constructions, in the following locations within the Samarkand Region:

1. The Jilanchi River, flowing through the territory of Bogdan in the Jizzakh district, along the northern slopes of the Nur-Atinsky ridge. Here, a stone dam has been preserved, which once retained the spring waters of the river. At present, this dam is almost completely covered with silt on the upstream side of the flow.
2. Along the southern border separating the current Mirzachul from the former desert, traces of old karez systems have been preserved. Further research in 1898 appears advisable.

If the project is not hindered, the complete leveling of the entire Mirzachul territory with a network could be completed not in two but in three to four years. Moreover, if following the survey a project and estimate are prepared by one technician, and funding is secured, practical implementation can begin” [1].

Another serious issue that arose as a consequence of the adopted policies was the disenfranchisement of the local population with regard to land ownership. This phenomenon manifested on a large scale in the territory of the Samarkand region as well. Land holdings that previously belonged to local feudal lords, wealthy landowners, and religious figures were significantly reduced. A portion of the confiscated land was subsequently transferred to the permanent use of peasants who worked the land, under special conditions. However, the land legislation, as well as the “Regulation on the Administration of Turkestan” (approved in 1886) and its amendments in 1900, did not provide for the possibility of transferring land to local peasants as private property.

As a result, those who lacked farming tools, draft animals, and financial resources found themselves entirely dependent on moneylenders and middlemen who bought the harvest [1].

Even when adjusted per capita, the Samarkand region demonstrated some of the lowest land availability indicators within the General-Governorate. According to calculations by V. P. Nalivkin, in 1897 the Samarkand region had 501,924 desyatinas of land for a total population of 857,847 people, amounting to only 0.58 desyatinas per person. In the same region, there were 171,569 families, of which 43,485 were homeless – meaning they did not possess either a personal homestead plot or a household yard for livestock keeping [1]. These figures indicate widespread impoverishment among the local population. As a result, usury intensified across the entire region. The measures undertaken by the Tsarist authorities failed to halt the growing economic dependence of the working masses on large landowners. Usury became widespread and entrenched. For example, Isa Khan, a former claimant to the Afghan throne, permanently resided in Samarkand and engaged in moneylending in Urgut. At the end of 1899, he lent 500,000 tanga at interest, with mutual obligations stipulating an annual rate of 15%. More than 30 peasant households in Urgut fell into debt bondage [1].

Undoubtedly, the landlessness of the local population became one of the principal causes of the aforementioned social and economic problems.

In conclusion, it should be emphasized that the Samarkand region, possessing fertile agricultural lands, played a significant role in the activities of the Land and State Property Administration of Turkestan. The widespread implementation of cotton cultivation policies in the region led to a reduction in the sowing areas allocated to other crops. At the same time, the Administration, whose primary task was the development of new lands, was actively engaged in this region. Land development work within the territory of Mirzachul, which belonged to the region, was carried out directly by this agency.

Another important process was the transformation of land ownership rights: the traditional system, which had been established over centuries, began to gradually change. A significant factor in this process was the Charter adopted in 1886, which, in turn, negatively affected the living conditions of the local population.

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