

The Introduction of Railways to Turkestan from the Perspective of the Press (Based on the Example of the Newspaper “Turkestan Viloyatining Gazeti”)

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Abstract: This article analyzes the railway that constructed by the Russian Empire in Turkestan, based on information from the newspaper “Turkestan Viloyatining Gazeti”. It reveals the importance of this railway, which was built by the imperial government to facilitate colonial governance in Turkestan and efficiently utilize the region’s economic resources. At the same time, the article provides information on the railway networks, the work processes involved in its construction, the number of people and goods transported after it was completed, as well as the economic hardships faced by the people of Turkestan.

Keywords: Russian Empire, Turkestan, colonialism, railway, Central Asian railway, Transcaspian railway, Bukhara Emirate, stations, bridges.

After fully conquering the Turkestan region, the Russian Empire quickly began building infrastructure to fully exploit the region’s economic potential and achieve its political objectives. One of the foremost priorities was the construction of railways. The issue of railway construction was initially brought to the forefront from political, military-strategic, and economic perspectives.

Alongside strengthening its colonial policy, the imperial government sought to solidify its position in the East.¹ The construction of the railway provided the Russian Empire with several strategic advantages as well: it allowed for the export of goods that could no longer compete in European markets to Turkestan and, through it, to the markets of Eastern countries. The railway also granted access to cheap raw materials for the growing textile industry and enabled the full exploitation and utilization of the region’s national wealth to meet the ever-increasing industrial demands of the empire. Additionally, it gave Tsarist Russia the ability to subdue the yet unconquered peoples, such as the Turkmen tribes fighting in the Transcaspian region, and to fortify the borders with Eastern countries. It facilitated the military suppression of all forms of resistance from the local populations against the new regime and forced the people into adapting to the colonial system through coercion.

This is why General K.P. von Kaufman, the governor-general of Turkestan, aptly remarked: “The improvement of transportation links connecting Russia with Turkestan is one of the most crucial tools for integrating the Turkestan region into the sphere of influence of the Russian Empire.”² These processes were highlighted to some extent in the newspaper “Turkestan Viloyatining Gazeti,” with the essence of the articles being closely linked to the interests of the empire.

Before the construction of the railway in Turkestan, several articles in the newspaper began discussing the benefits of the railway. For example, one article stated: “It is well known among merchants that sending and receiving messages more quickly, especially through fire carts (trains) and postal services, brings many advantages”³. In another article, it was mentioned: “People can travel much faster on roads, and instead of wasting a lot of time, they could use that time for other productive activities”⁴. Through such articles, the people of Turkestan were gradually accustomed to this policy. Furthermore, it was emphasized that railways existed only in culturally developed nations, whereas culturally underdeveloped ones did not have such advancements. The following was written: “The Russian state, by constructing the fire cart (railway) route from the Caspian Sea to Bukhara and Samarkand, has provided great benefit to the citizens of the Asian climate. The former nomads, who had been unable to reach their neighbors, will now gradually improve their livelihoods and enhance their wisdom by mingling with educated nations”⁵. Through these statements, the

¹ R. Xoliqova. Rossiya-Buxoro: tarix chorrahasida (XIX asrning ikkinchi yarmi – XX asr boshlari). Toshkent. 2005. B. 194.

² B.E. Yuldashev, Political factors influencing railway construction in Central Asia. Look to the past. 2021, vol. 4, issue 3, (95 – 100) pp.

³ “Turkiston viloyatining gazeti”. May 25, 1885.

⁴ Otash arobalarning foydasi xususida. “Turkiston viloyatining gazeti”. March 7, 1886.

⁵ Tamomi yer yuzida qiling‘on otash arobalarning uzunlig‘i. “Turkiston viloyatining gazeti”. April 23, 1888.

imperial government subtly implied that the people of Turkestan were of a lower class and that “culture” would be introduced to them through the railway. As mentioned earlier, these railways were not intended for the benefit of the Turkestan population, which becomes evident through other articles.

On February 11–12, 1880, a special council was convened under the leadership of the Minister of War, during which the issue of the Transcaspian region and the construction of a railway there were thoroughly discussed. The decision to begin the railway construction was made during this meeting⁶. As a result of this decision, on June 9 of that same year, a supreme decree was issued to construct a railway from the shores of the Caspian Sea to Kyzyl-Arvat⁷.

The railway was introduced to Turkestan through the Transcaspian region, with the initial section built from Mikhailovsky Bay to Kyzyl-Arvat in 1881⁸. Later, in 1885, the railway between the cities of Ashgabat and Merv was completed⁹. On July 25, 1885, a treaty was signed between the imperial government and Bukharan emir regarding the construction of a railway through the Bukhara Emirate. According to the treaty, large amounts of land from the Emirate’s holdings were allocated for the construction of stations, depots, warehouses, and other facilities. Additionally, the Bukhara government was obliged to assist in hiring local laborers for the construction of the railway and to provide construction materials¹⁰. After the completion of the Merv route, on February 16, 1886, the railway direction was extended toward the Bukhara Emirate, reaching the city of Chardjou, which belonged to Bukhara¹¹.

The railway was planned to pass from Chardjou along the Zarafshan Valley, which was considered the main economic artery of the Emirate. This was because the region was densely populated and had significant economic potential¹². By the end of 1886, the railway route to Chardjou was completed, and on December 1, the first train arrived in the city of Chardjou¹³. The newspaper also reported that the Emir of Bukhara supported the construction of this railway. Additionally, it was mentioned that the Chardjou Beg, Ostonaqul Dodkhoh, sent his people to assist in the construction of the railway¹⁴. In reality, the construction of the railway was detrimental to Bukhara’s economy, as the influx of Russian industrial products through this route led to the downfall of local craftsmen. This indicates that the Bukhara Emirate did not voluntarily assist in the construction of the railway but did so under pressure from the imperial government. For instance, in 1887 alone, 500,000 poods of cotton were sent to Russia via the Chardjou-Ashgabat route, while more than 1,100,000 poods of various goods were imported from Russia and sold¹⁵. Through the newly constructed railway, a continuous flow of goods was sent from Bukhara to Russia, including sheep and horse hides, various fabrics, carpets, fruits, and large quantities of cotton. These products were transported via the city of Astrakhan to the Nizhny Novgorod Fair, where they were sold¹⁶. By 1889, goods worth 21,741,880 rubles had been transported via the Transcaspian Railway¹⁷. Mainly cotton was transported from the region. In 1888, 873,092 poods of cotton were transported, and by 1895, this figure had increased to 3,133,564 poods¹⁸. By 1899, 443,000 passengers and 23,262,556 pounds of cargo had been transported via this railway. Ten years later, 2,981,953 passengers were carried, and 69,873,364 pounds of cargo were transported¹⁹.

On April 18 and 22, 1886, the Council of Ministers discussed the construction of a new branch of the Transcaspian Railway and decided to extend it to Samarkand. Based on this decision, the construction of the

⁶ R. Xoliqova. Rossiya-Buxoro: tarix chorrahasida (XIX asrning ikkinchi yarmi – XX asr boshlari). Toshkent. 2005. B. 194.

⁷ Nodir Yakubjanov. Iz istorii jeleznoy dorogi Turkestanskogo kraja. Karadeniz, 2015; (27). S. 217.

⁸ Gubarevich-Radobilskiy A. Ekonomicheskiy ocherk Buxari i Tunisa. SPb., 1905. S. 81.

⁹ Har xil xabarlar. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. February 15, 1886.

¹⁰ T.G. Tuxtametov. Rossiya i Buxarskiy emirat v nachale XX veka. Dushambe. 1977. S. 126.

¹¹ Ushbu joyg‘a ta’luq xabarlar. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. March 7, 1886.

¹² Gubarevich-Radobilskiy A. Ekonomicheskiy ocherk Buxari i Tunisa. SPb., 1905. S. 82.

¹³ “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. Desember 13, 1886.

¹⁴ “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. January 24, 1887.

¹⁵ Har xil xabarlar. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. February 13, 1888.

¹⁶ Har xil xabarlar. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. May 28, 1888.

¹⁷ Har xil xabarlar. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. March 19, 1890.

¹⁸ “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. June 16, 1895.

¹⁹ Nodir Yakubjanov. Iz istorii jeleznoy dorogi Turkestanskogo kraja. Karadeniz, 2015; (27). S. 219.

railway began and was completed in 1888. The new railway was named the “Transcaspian Military Railway”²⁰.

In order to extend the railway to the central cities of Turkestan, extensive preparations were made in Chardjou. This was necessary because the city is located on the southern side of the Amu Darya River, and the builders faced the task of transporting the train across the river. Nearly a year later, this task was accomplished, and on January 6, 1888, the first train crossed the Amu Darya Bridge. The bridge spanned four sections of the Amu Darya River, consisting of four parts: the first part was 802 sargin²¹, the second 82 sargin, the third 58 sargin, and the fourth 30 sargin, with a total length of 972 sargin²².

After the bridge was completed, the builders swiftly began constructing the railway towards the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand. As a result, on February 27, 1888, the first train arrived in Bukhara²³. This event was described in the newspaper as a gift in honor of Emperor Alexander III’s birthday. The railway was so important for the empire that, as soon as it reached Bukhara, the builders took only a two-day rest before immediately starting the construction towards the city of Samarkand²⁴. On May 15, with the arrival of the train in Samarkand, the Governor-General also came to the city, and the arrival of the train was celebrated with great festivity²⁵. This celebration was described in the travel diaries of E. Zimmerman, who was traveling along the Transcaspian Military Railway at that time²⁶. Additionally, other travelers also took journeys along this railway and published their memoirs²⁷. Based on their accounts, it is possible to learn about the railway routes and the cities it passed through. According to the newspaper, after the railway reached Bukhara, the city’s development accelerated significantly. It is mentioned that men and women dressed in European fashion and European-style carriages began appearing in the streets, and trade activities flourished.²⁸ Naturally, the question arises: whose trade actually prospered? According to the 1873 treaty, Russian citizens were granted the right to trade freely in Bukhara. This process significantly intensified with the arrival of the railway in Bukhara, while the livelihoods of the local population deteriorated.

Not long after, the second phase of railway construction in Turkestan began. In this phase, it was planned to extend the railway from Samarkand to Tashkent and the Fergana region. To achieve this goal, the emperor issued a decree. According to the decree, the property of landowners in the area through which the railway would pass was to be acquired in accordance with the law, and the value of the property would be compensated. These matters were to be handled in accordance with Articles 594 and 595 of the civil law²⁹. The construction began in 1895, when railway engineers started gathering in the city of Ashgabat³⁰. The chief engineer for this railway project was appointed to be an engineer named Rudinov³¹. Upon hearing this news, Tashkent’s respected citizens—Saidkarim Saidazimboy ugli, first guild merchant Arifkhoja Azizkhoja eshon ugli, and second guild merchant Mirazim Mirayubboy ogli—sent their congratulations to engineer Rudinov via telegraph³².

The construction of the railway proceeded in two directions: one route was directed toward Tashkent across Chinoz, while the other was to reach Andijan through Khojand. According to the instructions of the Turkestan Governor-General, the Tashkent route was to pass through Jizzakh, Havas, and Chinoz³³. On April 15, 1897, the first train arrived in the city of Jizzakh³⁴. The construction continued with the building of a

²⁰ R. Xoliqova. Rossiya-Buxoro: tarix chorrahasida (XIX asrning ikkinchi yarmi – XX asr boshlari). Toshkent. 2005. B. 194.

²¹ Sargin - sajen (Slavic sag - step, step) - 1) sajen - an ancient Russian unit of measurement of length. It was used until the introduction of the international metric system of measurements (1918). 1S.= 2.13360 m.

²² Chorjo’y yaqinida Amudaryo ustidin soling’on ko’pruk. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. January 16, 1888.

²³ Har xil xabarlar. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. March 7, 1888.

²⁴ “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. April 16, 1888.

²⁵ Samarqand shahrida Zakaspiya atalg’on temir yo’li yurishiga ruxsat bermak uchun janob general-gubernatorning onda borg’onlari xususida. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. June 4, 1888.

²⁶ E. Simmerman. Po Zakaspiyskiy jeleznoy dorog. VI. Samarkand. Russkaya misl. Moskva. 1899. S. 4 – 7.

²⁷ A.A. Olsufey, V.N. Panaev. Po Zakaspiyskoy voennoy jeleznoy dorog. Putevie vpechatleniya. Spb. 1899.

²⁸ Har xil xabarlar. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. June 20, 1888.

²⁹ Farmoyishi oliy. “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. August 16, 1895.

³⁰ “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. June 3, 1895.

³¹ “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. July 21, 1895.

³² “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. September 30, 1895.

³³ “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. February 22, 1896.

³⁴ “Turkiston viloyatining gazetisi”. April 25, 1897.

bridge over the Syr Darya near Chinoz. This bridge was fully completed in April 1898³⁵. For the inauguration and testing of the bridge, Turkestan Governor-General Ivanov, Syr Darya Province Military Governor Korolkov, and Samarkand Military Governor Fyodorov arrived³⁶.

In 1898, the railway reached Andijan through both routes, and the telegraph connecting the railway stations was also put into operation³⁷. Additionally, under the orders of the Governor-General, posts were installed to demarcate the land through which the railway passed³⁸.

However, it cannot be said that this railway was truly needed by the people of Turkestan. Reports in the newspaper mentioned instances of sabotage against the railway. Following such incidents, the Turkestan Governor-General issued a decree stating that the railway was beneficial for everyone and that damaging it was a sign of ignorance. The decree instructed the military head of Sirdarya Province, district governors, and precinct officers to punish those found responsible for damaging the railway according to criminal law³⁹. Another incident occurred on the Tashkent-Orenburg route, where a train accident took place. The cause of the accident was that local people living near the railway had sabotaged the rails⁴⁰. This incident was also a unique form of resistance against the imperial government.

The imperial authorities closely monitored the construction of the railway in Turkestan. In fact, in 1898, the Minister of Imperial Railways, Prince Mikhail Ivanovich Khilkov, visited Samarkand⁴¹. On October 1, he also visited the city of Tashkent⁴². In 1907, the Minister of Imperial Railways visited the Central Asian Railway and traveled to the cities of Ashgabat, Bukhara, and Karmana to inspect the condition of the railways. Later, on June 8, he arrived in Tashkent and met with the Governor-General⁴³.

Shortly thereafter, construction began on the Orenburg-Tashkent railway line. During this process, several injustices occurred. The lands of the local population in the areas through which the railway passed were unlawfully confiscated. For instance, in a petition addressed to the head of the southern section of the Tashkent-Orenburg railway, M. Muhammadboev noted that he had received no compensation for the land that had been taken from him. Such cases were frequent, leading to the economic decline of many people who relied on agriculture to support their families. According to some reports, nearly 13,000 hectares of land were confiscated from the population for the construction of this railway⁴⁴. In this unjust manner, the imperial administration continued the construction. By May 1902, 320 kilometers of land had been prepared for the railway, and rails had been laid along 40 kilometers of it⁴⁵. The newspaper provides information that, in addition to Russians, Kazakhs and Karakalpaks also worked on this construction. By mid-1903, the Tashkent-Orenburg railway had been completed up to Turkestan, and from January 5, 1904, train services began between Tashkent and Turkestan⁴⁶. In August 1905, the Tashkent-Orenburg railway was fully completed and connected to Russia's internal railway system. From that point onward, train services began operating three times⁴⁷ a week⁴⁸.

In 1909, the Central Asian Railway generated a revenue of 3,121,372 rubles. It served 84,361 passengers. When considering both freight and passenger transport, express trains brought in 129,932 rubles, while slower trains generated a profit of 10,194,373 rubles⁴⁹. During this period, special railway guides were

³⁵ "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". April 30, 1898.

³⁶ Ispitanie i osvyashenie jeleznodorojnogo most na Sirdari bliz Chinaza. "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". February 13, 1899.

³⁷ "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". January 15, 1899.

³⁸ Sirdaryo va Samarqand va Farg'ona ublustlarini voinni gubernatorlarig'a farmoyish. "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". June 8, 1899.

³⁹ Turkiston viloyatidag'i fuqarolarg'a farmoyish. "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". October 17, 1897.

⁴⁰ O krushenii poezda Orenburg-Tashkentskoy j-d. "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". Desember 17, 1906.

⁴¹ Rossiya mamlakatidag'i tamomi yo'llarga qaraydurg'on knyaz Mixail Ivanovich Xilkov janobning Samarqand shahrida to'quf qilg'onlari xususida. "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". June 10, 1898.

⁴² "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". October 2, 1899.

⁴³ Mestnaya izvestiya. "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". July 12, 1907.

⁴⁴ Nodir Yakubjanov. Iz istorii jeleznoy dorogi Turkestanskogo kraya. Karadeniz, 2015; (27). S. 219.

⁴⁵ Raznaya izvestiya. "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". July 2, 1902.

⁴⁶ Ob otkritii dvijeniya po jeleznoy dorog ot Tashkenta do Turkestana "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". January 15, 1904.

⁴⁷ The trips were made on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.

⁴⁸ Mestnaya izvestiya. "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". August 6, 1905.

⁴⁹ Deyatelnost Sred-Az. Jelez. dorogi. "Turkiston viloyatining gazetii". Desember 12, 1910.

also created, providing detailed schematic information about the entire railway network, including routes, stations, and bridges⁵⁰.

In general, although the newspaper repeatedly emphasized that the imperial government built the railway for the “benefit” of the people of Turkestan, it was primarily directed toward serving the empire’s own goals. On one hand, it enabled the exploitation of the region's economic resources for the empire’s interests and facilitated the easy movement of military units. On the other hand, it aimed to create a market for the growing Russian industrial products and, subsequently, expand into other Asian countries.

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