

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE SAMARKAND CUSTOMS OFFICE: ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND IMPERIAL POLICY IN TURKESTAN

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Abstract

This study explores the establishment and evolution of the customs system in the Turkestan region under the Russian Empire, with a particular focus on the opening of the Samarkand customs office in 1902. The customs office played a crucial role in formalizing trade processes, centralizing economic control, and integrating Turkestan into the broader economic space of the empire. By regulating imports and exports, especially of key commodities like tea, cotton, silk, and leather, the customs administration facilitated the growth of state revenues and contributed to the economic stabilization of the region. The gradual implementation of imperial customs policies reflects a broader socio-economic strategy aimed at strengthening Russia's influence in Central Asia. The transformation from fragmented local customs practices to a unified imperial system marked a significant shift in regional trade dynamics and economic relations. Ultimately, the Samarkand customs office became a pivotal institution that reshaped both the local economy and the wider Central Asian market under Russian rule.

Keywords. Turkestan, Russian Empire, Samarkand customs office, economic policy, trade regulation, customs system, Central Asia, tea trade, economic integration, imperial administration, export-import control, regional economic transformation.

Introduction

At the turn of the 19th to 20th century, the Turkestan region was regarded as strategically significant in terms of the Russian Empire's economic and political interests. Samarkand, in particular, held special importance as a geographical and economic hub. The establishment of a customs office in Samarkand in 1902 marked a new phase in the implementation of Russia's economic policy in Turkestan [1].

In 1886, the Tashkent branch of the Ministry of Finance's Excise Department was created to increase revenues derived from colonial possessions. This office was responsible for collecting indirect taxes on the production and trade of alcoholic beverages, tobacco, matches, and petroleum products, as well as levying fees related to stamps, courts, passports, and other services. In 1890, the customs district was formed to replace the position of a special finance ministry official under the Turkestan governor-general, aiming to regulate trade relations with all states bordering Turkestan. By 1894, the Bukhara and Khiva Khanates were incorporated into the unified customs territory of the Russian Empire [2, 51].

Prior to 1902 and the opening of the Samarkand customs post, Bukhara—being the closest region to Turkestan—was considered the main importer of tea. However, difficult trade conditions in the Emirate and arbitrary zakat levies imposed by the Bukhara administration compelled merchants to petition imperial authorities for a customs office in Samarkand to serve Turkestan's needs. This significantly diminished the role of the Bukhara customs post in Central Asian trade. Subsequently, only a minor portion of tea passing through Bukhara was sent to Khiva, while the majority remained destined solely for Bukhara's markets [2, 51].

It is important to emphasize that the primary function of the Samarkand customs office was to monitor tea imports into Turkestan and to collect the corresponding customs duties [3, 36]. According to the "Most Modest Report" of the military governor of the Samarkand region for 1901, Samarkand ranked first in tea trade among all cities in the Asian part of the Russian Empire [4, 18]. Furthermore, tea consumption in the Turkestan governorate, as well as in the Bukhara Emirate and Khiva Khanate, was significantly higher than in the rest of the Russian Empire. The empire systematically exploited this by gradually increasing customs tariffs on tea. For example, the duty on one pood of black tea rose from 25 rubles in 1894 to 31 rubles 50 kopecks by 1901 [5, p. 92].

The establishment of the customs office in Samarkand was primarily aimed at formalizing trade processes and increasing state revenue. This customs post facilitated both the import of industrial goods from Russia into Turkestan and the export of local products—such as cotton, silk, leather, and other goods—to external markets.

According to archival sources, between 1890 and 1910, a policy was actively pursued in the Turkestan region to align the customs system with the broader Russian imperial framework. By a special decree issued in 1901, most of Turkestan's territory was incorporated into a unified customs zone of the Russian Empire, with exceptions including certain areas of Bukhara, Khiva, Panja, and the territories near the Amu Darya River [2, p. 51].

The objective of this policy was not to directly restrict trade freedom in Turkestan but rather to establish centralized regulation and oversight. The gradual introduction of the customs system across Turkestan was a key element of this socio-economic strategy. In particular, the creation of the customs administration in Samarkand represented a logical continuation of this process.

In November 1912, as part of a centralized reorganization of the entire customs system of the Russian Empire, the Turkestan Customs District was replaced by the Tashkent Customs Inspectorate. This administrative reform not only had territorial implications but also contributed to strengthening Russia's economic position across the broader Central Asian markets [2, p. 51].

The opening of the customs office in Samarkand in 1902 should be regarded as a logical and significant milestone in the implementation of the Russian Empire's economic policy within

the Turkestan region. This development not only formalized trade relations but also introduced a centralized system of economic governance. Samarkand's strategic geographic location, its prominent role in the tea trade, and the necessity to regulate the flow of goods entering through Bukhara motivated the imperial administration to establish the customs office in this city. Consequently, the operation of this institution transformed not only the local trade system but also reshaped regional economic relations.

The gradual alignment of customs policies with imperial standards reflects the deepening integration of Turkestan into the Russian Empire's economic sphere. Revenues collected through customs, along with the processes of export and import and the movement of goods, served as tools for ensuring economic stability. Thus, the establishment of the Samarkand customs office became a turning point not only for the local economy but also for the broader economic system of Central Asia.

Conclusion

The establishment and development of the customs system in Turkestan, particularly the opening of the Samarkand customs office in 1902, represent a pivotal chapter in the Russian Empire's economic and administrative consolidation of the region. This initiative was driven by multiple factors: the strategic geographic importance of Turkestan, the need to regulate and formalize trade flows, and the imperial objective to integrate local economies into the broader economic framework of the empire. Samarkand, as a key commercial hub—especially in the lucrative tea trade—became the focal point for these efforts.

The creation of the customs office not only enhanced the efficiency of trade regulation but also facilitated the imposition of centralized economic control over a region previously characterized by fragmented and locally governed trade practices. By aligning the customs system with all-Russian standards through gradual reforms and administrative reorganizations, the empire sought to strengthen its influence, stabilize revenue streams, and assert control over the movement of goods between Central Asia and Russia.

This process resulted in significant transformations in regional economic relations. The shift from decentralized, local customs authorities—such as those in Bukhara and Khiva—to a unified imperial customs regime diminished the role of traditional trade centers, redirected trade flows, and contributed to the economic integration of Turkestan into the empire. Moreover, the customs revenues and regulatory frameworks served as vital instruments for sustaining the economic stability of both the region and the empire as a whole.

In sum, the establishment of the Samarkand customs office was more than a mere administrative measure; it marked a strategic turning point that reshaped the economic landscape of Central Asia, deepening Turkestan's incorporation into the Russian imperial economy and paving the way for further political and economic centralization.

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