

SOCIAL LIFE IN THE FERGANA VALLEY DURING THE PERIOD OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE

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Abstract:

This article examines the socio-cultural life of Turkestan, particularly the Fergana Valley, during the period of Russian imperial rule in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study analyzes the colonial policies implemented by the Tsarist administration, the transformation of the local economy—especially agriculture—and the attitude of the indigenous population toward socio-cultural processes. Special attention is given to changes in education, religious life, publishing activities, and the emergence of the local press. The article also highlights the role of local intellectuals and religious scholars in preserving cultural identity and responding to colonial governance.

Keywords: Social life, books, newspapers, typography, colonialism, waqf, publishing, administration, supply, youth, politics.

Main Text

The colonial policy of the Russian Empire in Turkestan during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was primarily aimed at exploiting the region's natural and economic resources. One of the most significant manifestations of this policy was the rapid expansion of cotton cultivation, which gradually became the dominant agricultural crop in the region.

According to researcher U. Usarov, the Russian Empire deliberately expanded cotton fields in Turkestan, particularly in the Fergana Valley, to supply metropolitan industrial enterprises with cheap raw materials. Special emphasis was placed on cultivating American cotton varieties. By 1901, American cotton was planted on 194,573 desyatinas of land, whereas local cotton varieties covered only 15,562 desyatinas. By the end of that year, 9,808,944 poods of American cotton were harvested. Between 1885 and 1915, the area of cotton cultivation in the Fergana region increased more than threefold, while cotton production rose from 1,200 poods to 9,277,000 poods, accounting for approximately 60 percent of Turkestan's total cotton output. This rapid expansion of cotton cultivation displaced grain crops, resulting in food shortages and increased dependence on grain imports from Russia [7:148].

At the same time, numerous administrative councils held under the governor-general developed a policy aimed at closely monitoring the spiritual and religious life of the local

population. The objective of this policy was to weaken and eliminate what the authorities considered the “harmful” aspects of Islam. Decisions were adopted to grant privileges to local residents who graduated from Russian-native schools, including eligibility for honorary citizenship and administrative positions such as village elders and volost administrators after completing probationary service. In addition, Orthodox clergy were encouraged to exert cultural influence on the local population without openly pursuing missionary objectives [9:336–337].

Prominent Jadid leader Mahmudkhoja Behbudi sharply criticized these policies, noting that laws enacted by missionaries and autocratic officials aimed at the cultural and religious erosion of Muslims. Behbudi pointed out that under the new regulations, individuals over the age of 25 could be elected as volost administrators or judges regardless of their knowledge or qualifications. This led to the appointment of unqualified judges, teachers, and imams, undermining traditional systems in which religious officials were appointed only after rigorous examinations supervised by respected scholars. Behbudi concluded that these measures produced disastrous consequences for Muslim society [3].

Researcher N. Abdulahotov, in his study on religious and hagiographic sources in the Margilan intellectual environment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, provides extensive information on the scientific, cultural, and literary life of Margilan. He demonstrates that despite colonial oppression, local scholars and poets actively resisted social and religious injustice and preserved intellectual traditions [1:29].

Abdulahotov further emphasizes that even after the establishment of Tsarist colonial rule in Central Asia, major historical cities continued to function as important intellectual centers. Margilan, located near the administrative center of the Fergana region, gradually emerged as a cultural hub. Scholars educated in Bukhara madrasas strengthened Margilan’s scholarly community and initiated reforms in religious and social life. Numerous scholars produced tazkiras, tabaqat works, manaqib, hagiographies, and fiqh treatises, many of which remain insufficiently studied today [1:5, 21].

One of the key advantages of the local education system was its multilingual nature. Abdulahotov notes that nearly all teachers in Margilan madrasas were poets who composed works in Uzbek and Tajik, and often in Arabic as well [1:29].

From the late nineteenth century onward, local intellectuals in Turkestan, particularly in the Fergana Valley, sought to establish their own periodical publications. Research by D. Alinazarova highlights the emergence of national journalism in the region and the efforts of local intellectuals in this field [2:59]. Although official permission was granted for Russian-language newspapers, publications in local languages were not initially approved. Consequently, the first newspaper in the Fergana Valley was the Russian-language Ferganskie Oblastnye Vedomosti, published between 1906 and 1917 [8:32–33].

The first printing houses in the Fergana Valley were established in 1897 by I.A. Minakov, followed by G. Portsev (1901), M.V. Katz-Nelson (1907), Ishaqkhan Ibrat (1908), and later by M.N. Chekanina and A.P. Rozhkov (1913), and O. Mahmudov (1914). By the early twentieth century, ten printing houses were operating in the region [2:17; 4:55].

Before launching their own publications, local intellectuals relied on newspapers and journals published in Crimea and Kazan, such as Tarjuman, Vaqt, and Yulduz [5:12–15]. On April 3, 1914, the first Uzbek-language newspaper in the Fergana Valley, Sadoyi Fergana, was published [6].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the colonial policy of the Tsarist administration in the Fergana Valley did not differ significantly from its approach in other regions of Turkestan. However, these policies had a particularly negative impact on the development of national education and the cultural life of the local population. The indigenous Muslim population was deprived of many educational and cultural opportunities that had existed during the period of the khanates, leading to long-term consequences for social and cultural development.

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