

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE SOCIAL SITUATION IN TURKESTAN AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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Abstract: This article examines the historiography of the social conditions in Turkestan within the broader framework of Central Asian historical studies. The study highlights the complexity and multi-layered nature of historiographical interpretations shaped by significant political transformations, particularly the Russian imperial conquest in the late nineteenth century and subsequent incorporation into the Soviet system. The findings demonstrate that historiography of Russian Empire was largely driven by Eurocentric and colonial ideologies, portraying the region as backward and legitimizing imperial expansion under the notion of a “civilizing mission.” Soviet historiography, while contributing to empirical research and institutional development, was heavily influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideology, reducing complex social processes to class struggle and economic determinism. In contrast, Jadid intellectuals introduced an internal reformist perspective, emphasizing education and modernization as key factors of social progress. Western scholars provided more balanced and multi-dimensional analyses, focusing on colonialism, identity, gender, and social structures. The study further reveals that contemporary Uzbek historiography has shifted towards a more critical and nationally grounded interpretation, reassessing colonial and Soviet narratives while emphasizing objectivity and source-based analysis.

Key words: Turkestan, historiography, social conditions, Russian Empire, Soviet historiography, colonialism, Jadidism, Central Asia, methodological approaches, ideological interpretation, post-Soviet studies, social structure.

Introduction. The historiography of the social conditions of Turkestan has emerged as one of the most complex, multi-layered, and methodologically contested fields within the study of Central Asian history. This complexity is primarily associated with the region’s turbulent historical trajectory, particularly the sharp political transformations beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century with its conquest by the Russian Empire and its subsequent incorporation into the Soviet state system. Therefore, the study of Turkestan’s social life requires not only the recording of historical facts but also an analysis of how and within which ideological frameworks these facts have been interpreted.

In this context, historiography functions not merely as an auxiliary tool but as an independent object of scholarly inquiry. Historical writings reveal the political agendas, ideological orientations, and scientific paradigms of specific periods. As a system of accumulated knowledge about the past, Turkestan historiography reflects historically constructed consciousness and ideological perspectives, necessitating comprehensive, comparative, and critical methodological approaches.

Literature review and methodology. The historiography of the Russian imperial period was formed on a conceptual foundation serving imperial interests, in which the conquest of Turkestan was often interpreted as a “civilizing mission.” This approach, grounded in Eurocentric ideas, portrayed local societies as “backward” and “in need of development,” thereby legitimizing colonial policies. For instance, Nikolai Aleksandrovich Halpin attempted to justify Russia’s expansion into Central Asia as a strategic and economic necessity. According to him, the empire introduced order, governance, and modernization to the region; however, such interpretations largely ignored or underestimated the unique developmental patterns of local

social institutions. Although imperial historians relied on statistical data and ethnographic observations, their interpretations were often one-sided, filtered through ideological perspectives, leading to distortions of historical reality. Consequently, Turkestan society was depicted as a “passive object,” while its internal dynamics and mechanisms of transformation remained insufficiently explored.

Within imperial historiography, agrarian relations were treated as a central research subject to explain the economic foundations of society. Later, Raisa Halfinovna Aminova significantly contributed to revising this perspective by demonstrating that land relations in Central Asia were complex and multi-layered, and could not be adequately explained through a simplified model of “feudal exploitation.” She argued that land ownership, water resource management, and communal economic forms in the region followed unique historical trajectories. This underscores the limitations of applying European historical models to explain Turkestan’s socio-economic system. Agrarian relations also reveal issues of social stratification, property forms, and economic hierarchy.

Results and discussion. The issue of the social structure of Turkestan society occupied an important place in imperial historiography but was often interpreted in simplified and stereotypical terms. Although Sergey Petrovich Polyakov offered relatively deeper analysis, his work was not entirely free from the influence of Marxist paradigms. Earlier authors such as Dmitrii Nikolaevich Logofet, in his well-known work “Turkestan – A Land Without Rights,” described the difficult social conditions of the population; however, his portrayal was often subjective and based on orientalist stereotypes. He depicted local society as passive, weak, and in need of external governance. As a result, representations of Turkestan society became ideologically constructed narratives tailored for European audiences.

The emergence of the Jadid movement in the early twentieth century marked a turning point in historiography. Intellectuals such as Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, Abdurauf Fitrat, and Munavvarqori Abdurashidkhanov promoted the idea of reforming society through internal transformation. They sharply criticized social inequality, illiteracy, and economic backwardness. In particular, Fitrat emphasized enlightenment as the key factor of social progress and advocated modernization. The Jadids viewed history not merely as a record of the past but as a tool for shaping the future.

Soviet historiography was formed on the basis of Marxist-Leninist theory. Mikhail Nikolaevich Pokrovsky interpreted history through economic determinism, linking all social processes to class struggle. Within this framework, the history of Turkestan was explained through the stages of “feudalism–capitalism–socialism.” However, this universal model often overlooked local specificities, resulting in simplified and ideologized representations of historical reality.

In Soviet historiography, the Russian conquest was portrayed as a “progressive phenomenon.” Historian Bobojon Gafurov actively supported this view, arguing that Russian rule accelerated the development of capitalist relations and modernization. However, this interpretation largely ignored the negative aspects of colonialism, including economic exploitation, cultural assimilation, and political dependence. In contrast, Sergey Pavlovich Tolstov, through his studies of ancient Khorezm civilization, demonstrated that the region possessed an independent and highly developed cultural heritage.

Western historiography, on the other hand, has demonstrated more balanced and multi-dimensional approaches. Edward Allworth analyzed Russian rule as a form of colonialism and examined its social consequences. Adeeb Khalid interpreted Jadidism as an internal reform movement, while Douglas Northrop explored the gender and social impacts of Soviet modernization. Jeff Sahadeo focused on urban social structures and ethnic segregation.

In contemporary Uzbek historiography, new critical and nationally oriented approaches have emerged. Hamid Ziyayev critically assessed Russian colonialism and its social consequences, while Qahramon Rajabov interpreted Jadidism as a key factor of national awakening. Given that

Turkestan historiography has developed under different ideological frameworks across various periods, its comparative and critical analysis today allows for a more objective understanding of historical reality.

The colonial policy of the Russian Empire in Central Asia was most clearly manifested in its administrative system, which aimed to establish comprehensive political, economic, and cultural control over the local population in service of long-term imperial interests. The policies implemented by the Governor-General of Turkestan, Konstantin Petrovich Kaufman, represent a classic example of colonial governance. In his 1876 report to the Russian Minister of War, Count Dmitry Alekseyevich Milyutin, the ideological foundations of colonial policy were explicitly articulated. The document emphasized the shared interests of European powers such as Russia and Britain in Asia and portrayed the Muslim world and local populations as their primary “adversaries.”

These views constituted core elements of colonial ideology, justifying the “civilizing mission” by depicting local populations as culturally inferior. Kaufman’s ideas were later reflected in legislative projects on the governance of Turkestan, including the regulations developed by Fyodor Girs, which institutionalized the political marginalization of the local population and the dominance of the Russian administrative apparatus.

Between 1865 and 1917, the Turkestan Governor-Generalship functioned as a centralized military-administrative system subordinate to the Russian state, combining military and civil authority to maximize control over the region. This system reflected colonial governance principles rather than the rule of law.

Hungarian orientalist Ármin Vámbéry emphasized that Russian territorial expansion was driven not by demographic growth but by policies of rapid Russification, highlighting the cultural dimension of colonial domination. Economic exploitation was another key feature, particularly through transforming Turkestan into a raw material base. The expansion of cotton cultivation, while seemingly beneficial, disrupted traditional agriculture and led to food insecurity. Local historian Ishaqkhan Ibrat vividly described how the focus on cotton production resulted in economic imbalance, indebtedness, and impoverishment.

Colonial policies also had profound social consequences, intensifying social stratification and undermining traditional crafts. Furthermore, the exemption of local populations from military service reduced their social and political engagement, a phenomenon critically noted by Ahmad Zaki Validi.

During the Soviet period, these processes were reinterpreted as progressive developments, while their negative aspects were downplayed. Only after Uzbekistan gained independence did more objective and critical approaches emerge, reassessing colonial history based on factual and source-based analysis.

In the Soviet Union, historiography functioned not only as a system of knowledge but also as an ideologically integrated institution. Historical science served as a tool for political legitimization, shaped by Marxist-Leninist theory and dialectical materialism. This led to the reduction of complex historical processes to class struggle and limited the scope of scholarly inquiry.

Although Soviet historiography achieved significant empirical and institutional advancements, it remained constrained by ideological control. Topics such as national liberation movements, political repression, and ethnic conflicts were marginalized or omitted. Nevertheless, the period also witnessed important developments in source studies and archaeology.

By the late twentieth century, particularly during the “perestroika” and “glasnost” reforms, greater openness in historiography allowed for the reassessment of previously restricted topics. Scholars such as Y.N. Afanasyev emphasized the need to remove ideological filters to achieve genuine historical research.

Overall, Soviet historiography represents a complex and contradictory phenomenon, contributing both to scientific development and ideological distortion. Contemporary post-Soviet

historiography continues to critically reassess this legacy, aiming to reconstruct historical truth through pluralistic and interdisciplinary approaches. This process represents a significant paradigmatic shift in modern historical scholarship.

Conclusion. The historiography of Turkestan's social conditions represents a complex and evolving field shaped by shifting political regimes, ideological frameworks, and methodological approaches. This study has demonstrated that historical interpretations of Turkestan were not neutral reflections of reality but were deeply influenced by the epistemological and ideological contexts in which they were produced. Historiography of Russian Empire functioned as an instrument of imperial legitimization, framing colonization as a civilizing mission, while largely ignoring the internal dynamics of local societies. Soviet historiography, despite its contributions to empirical research and institutional development, imposed a rigid Marxist-Leninist framework that simplified historical processes into deterministic class-based narratives.

In contrast, Jadid intellectuals offered an alternative perspective rooted in internal reform, emphasizing education, social progress, and modernization. Western historiography introduced more nuanced and multi-dimensional analyses, incorporating perspectives on colonialism, identity, and social transformation. In the post-independence period, Uzbek historiography has increasingly adopted critical and nationally oriented approaches, reassessing earlier interpretations and striving for greater objectivity and methodological pluralism.

The findings of this research highlight the necessity of critically re-evaluating inherited historiographical paradigms and recognizing the role of ideology in shaping historical knowledge. A comprehensive understanding of Turkestan's social history requires an integrative approach that combines comparative, interdisciplinary, and source-based analysis. Ultimately, the deconstruction of biased narratives and the incorporation of diverse perspectives contribute not only to the reconstruction of historical truth but also to the strengthening of historical consciousness and national identity in the contemporary context.

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