



## THE IMPACT OF THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE'S CUSTOMS POLICY ON THE MARKETS OF TURKESTAN: A SOURCE REVIEW

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**Abstract.** This article analyzes the economic and political dimensions of the customs policy implemented by the Russian Empire in Central Asia, particularly in the Turkestan region, during the second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century. Based on historical sources, the study examines the Empire's protectionist approach and its impact on local markets, international trade routes, and commercial relations with neighboring countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, and China. It also discusses the influence of customs policies on trade flows, local merchants' activities, and the broader context of imperial interests.

**Keywords.** Russian Empire, Turkestan, customs policy, protectionism, trade, Iran, Afghanistan, China, transit, tea trade, Samarkand, Bukhara, Kokand.

### INTRODUCTION

With the expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia during the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, the region underwent significant economic and political transformations. Through customs policies, the Empire not only protected its economic interests but also sought to strengthen its influence in strategically important territories. The Turkestan region played a pivotal role in Russia's foreign trade policy, particularly as a transit and raw materials base in its commercial expansion toward the East.

### SOURCES AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Russian Empire's customs policy was highly politicized. For example, a special decree from the Ministry of Finance allowed members of the Yomut Turkmen tribe to cross the Persian border freely,[1,108] recognizing their traditional nomadic lifestyle in the border areas. [2,92] This demonstrated Russia's intent to avoid interfering in the internal affairs of these communities while gaining their loyalty. Moreover, to facilitate the activities of Turkestani merchants, imperial authorities exempted certain customs offices from reporting data on duty-free goods.[2,92] As stated in the circular of the Ministry of Finance, "... the transportation of goods from the Central Asian customs institutions was permitted without any documentation, and no administrative (customs) duties were collected from them." [2,93]

To attract Iran into its economic orbit, a decree in 1889 allowed Persian goods to pass through certain stations of the Trans-Caspian Railway without customs duties. [2,133] In 1904, the government instituted a 5% customs duty on Persian and Afghan goods entering the Emirate of Bukhara and Turkestan. Additionally, in the same year, the import of sweets and confectionery from China into Turkestan was prohibited.[2,228]

The Empire also implemented strict censorship of printed materials crossing the border, requiring all foreign books and publications to be reviewed by the Caucasus Censorship Committee. However, domestic correspondence between European Russia and Turkestan was



not subject to customs control, nor were postal items from Bukhara to Russia. By contrast, packages from Western Europe to Turkestan were taxed.[2,129]

In trade with China, the Semipalatinsk and Semirechye customs posts played crucial roles. The 1881 Treaty of Saint Petersburg returned the city of Kulja to China while granting Russia the right to duty-free trade in Mongolia and other Chinese regions. [3,57] Although a 50-verst free trade zone was initially permitted, [4,75] this privilege was later revoked in 1913 due to an unfavorable trade balance with China.[1,108]

Russian dominance in the tea trade expanded as Chinese tea became more accessible via Batumi, displacing Indian tea previously routed through difficult Afghan and Persian terrain. Transport costs fell dramatically, reinforcing Russian economic advantages. [5, Φ-1396] This diplomatic and logistical success significantly reduced the share of British India and Bukhara in the regional tea market.

## METHODOLOGY AND EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

The methodological foundation of this study is based on historical comparative analysis of imperial legal documents, circulars, and customs data. A. Gubarevich, a Russian customs official, suggested mutual tariff preferences and criticized unequal customs rates imposed on Afghan imports, including cotton, leather, woolen coats, and luxury silk fabrics. He argued that the customs policy should be reformed to encourage trade and win Afghan loyalty through economic means rather than political pressure.[9, № 125]

Iran also played a central role in Russia's economic strategy, especially in re-exporting goods to Afghanistan. Although tariffs were imposed on sugar and textiles, the Trans-Caspian Railway enabled Russia to penetrate North Iranian markets, previously dominated by British goods. Preferential tariffs and logistical advantages helped Russia assert itself in these markets.[8,63]

**Results.** From the 1860s, the Russian Empire pursued cotton independence by increasing duties on imported American cotton. [12,112] While duties fluctuated over time, they were raised significantly in the early 1900s, especially in response to rising expenditures from international conflicts such as the Boxer Rebellion. [4,66] These increases negatively affected consumer access to manufactured goods, yet were justified by protectionist priorities.[1,109]

Trade between Russia and Turkestan grew dramatically. From just 3.5 million rubles in the 1830s, it expanded to 65 million by 1896 and reached 300 million rubles by 1914. [5,196] Exports from Turkestan included cotton (75%), livestock (10%), dried fruits (4%), cottonseed oil (3%), and fish (2.5%). Imports from Russia were dominated by textile products (41%), foodstuffs (13%), metal goods (11%), and grain (7%).[10,36]

Turkestan's economic role was thus defined primarily by agriculture, serving as a raw materials supplier. The Empire successfully used it as a transit route for exports to Afghanistan, Iran, and Western China. [1,109] Transportation costs via Turkestan were significantly lower than those via British India, which reinforced Russian strategic advantages.[13,73]

**Conclusion.** The customs policy of the Russian Empire in Turkestan was designed to secure imperial economic and geopolitical interests. It enabled Russia to strengthen its position in foreign markets, apply protectionist measures, and gain easier access to Eastern trade. Consequently, Turkestan became both a source of raw materials and a transit corridor. The customs regime limited the region's economic independence and reinforced Russia's economic



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dominance. These policies challenged British influence in the region and reshaped commercial flows across Asia.

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