



CAUSES OF THE CLASH OF COLONIAL INTERESTS IN CENTRAL ASIA IN THE 19TH CENTURY: BASED ON RUSSIAN IMPERIAL AND SOVIET SOURCES

Asqarov Azimjon Odiljon o'g'li

3rd year PhD student, Namangan state university

E-mail: askarovazimjon999@gmail.com

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17421826>

Abstract

This paper explores the underlying causes and dynamics of the clash of colonial interests in Central Asia during the nineteenth century, with particular emphasis on the perspectives of the Russian Empire and later Soviet historiography. The “Great Game” between Russia and Great Britain was not merely a geopolitical contest but also an ideological, economic, and cultural confrontation that reshaped the political destiny of Central Asia. By analyzing Russian imperial documents, official correspondences, and Soviet interpretations, this study identifies the strategic, economic, and civilizational motivations that drove the Russian expansion and examines how Soviet scholars reinterpreted this process as part of a broader anti-colonial narrative.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russian Empire, Great Game, Soviet historiography, colonial policy, imperialism, geopolitics

1. Introduction

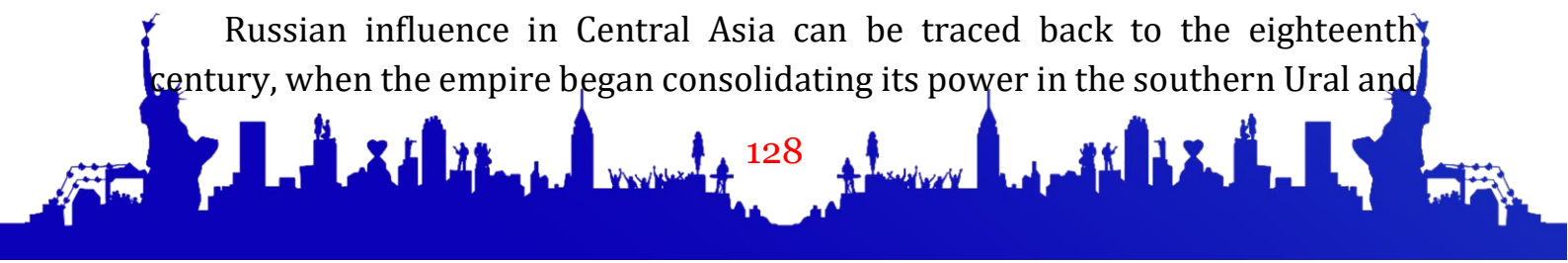
The nineteenth century marked one of the most turbulent periods in Central Asian history. It witnessed the decline of traditional khanates—Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand—and the rapid expansion of the Russian Empire into the region. At the same time, the British Empire, already dominant in India, perceived Russia’s southward advance as a direct threat to its imperial security. This confrontation between the two powers, later termed the “Great Game,” was one of the defining features of nineteenth-century Eurasian geopolitics.

Central Asia, located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, became the arena of this struggle due to its strategic location, vast natural resources, and control over key trade routes connecting East and West. Russian imperial archives and Soviet scholarly works reveal that Russia’s penetration into Central Asia was motivated by a combination of strategic defense, economic opportunity, and the ideology of civilizational mission.

2. Historical Background of Russian Expansion

2.1 Early Stages of Russian Penetration

Russian influence in Central Asia can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when the empire began consolidating its power in the southern Ural and





Siberian regions. The first Russian forts—Orenburg, Orsk, and Verny—were established as part of a gradual military and economic expansion aimed at securing frontiers and controlling steppe trade routes.

By the early nineteenth century, Russia had subdued most of the Kazakh steppe, establishing protectorates and exploiting local rivalries among tribal leaders. This process, often described as “peaceful annexation” in Russian sources, was in reality a slow but deliberate incorporation through military presence, administrative control, and economic dependence.

2.2 The Great Game and Anglo-Russian Rivalry

British policymakers in India viewed Russia’s advance with suspicion, fearing that it could open a pathway to invade India. The resulting diplomatic and intelligence competition became the “Great Game,” a term popularized by Rudyard Kipling. Between 1830 and 1880, numerous British missions—such as those led by Alexander Burnes and Charles Stoddart—entered Central Asia, often under the guise of trade or diplomacy but with the aim of gathering intelligence.

In contrast, Russian imperial documents from this period (such as those preserved in the Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire) depict their activities as measures to “civilize backward nations,” “ensure frontier security,” and “suppress slave trade.” Soviet historians later criticized this rhetoric as a typical example of colonial justification.

3. Causes of Colonial Competition in Central Asia

3.1 Geopolitical Motives

From the Russian perspective, Central Asia was vital for defending its southern borders and ensuring the security of Siberia and the Volga region. The empire feared incursions by nomadic tribes, as well as the possibility of British influence expanding northward from Afghanistan. Thus, military control over the region was seen as both defensive and preemptive.

British interests, on the other hand, centered around the protection of India—the “crown jewel” of the empire. British archives, including reports from the Indian Office, reveal deep concern that Russian control over Central Asia could enable Moscow to threaten India via Afghanistan or Persia. As a result, British diplomacy sought to establish Afghanistan as a buffer state.

3.2 Economic Factors

Both powers were driven by economic incentives. Central Asia’s fertile oases and extensive cotton production potential were of strategic importance. For Russia, cotton from Turkestan reduced dependence on American imports, especially after the American Civil War (1861–1865). The construction of





infrastructure such as the Trans-Caspian Railway (1880s) further integrated the region into the Russian imperial economy.

In Soviet historiography, economic motives were reinterpreted through the Marxist framework: the Russian Empire's conquest was portrayed as an "inevitable stage of capitalist expansion," laying the foundation for later socialist transformation. Yet, despite this ideological shift, the underlying economic rationale—resource extraction and market creation—remained central.

3.3 Ideological and Civilizational Justifications

Russian imperial ideology framed its conquest as a "civilizing mission," emphasizing the introduction of modern governance, education, and Orthodox Christianity. Documents from the Russian Geographical Society and reports by General Kaufman (the first Governor-General of Turkestan) highlight this paternalistic discourse.

Soviet historians, while denouncing the colonial character of Tsarist expansion, paradoxically retained the narrative of modernization—arguing that Russian rule brought technological progress, literacy, and social reform to the region. This double narrative—imperial and Soviet—illustrates the continuity of Russia's self-perception as a bearer of civilization.

4. Key Stages of Russian Conquest

4.1 The Annexation of the Kazakh Steppe

Between 1820 and 1860, Russia gradually incorporated the Kazakh steppe through a mixture of diplomacy and coercion. The Steppe Statute of 1868 formalized administrative control, dividing the territory into regions governed by military officials. Soviet historians later described this process as a "contradictory phenomenon" that simultaneously destroyed nomadic autonomy and facilitated economic modernization.

4.2 The Conquest of the Central Asian Khanates

The decisive phase began with military campaigns against the khanates of Kokand, Khiva, and Bukhara between 1864 and 1885. Russian troops, under generals such as Cherniaev and Kaufman, captured Tashkent in 1865, Samarkand in 1868, and Khiva in 1873.

Russian imperial propaganda justified these conquests as responses to "border raids" and the need to suppress "slave markets." However, internal military correspondences reveal clear economic and strategic objectives—control of trade routes, taxation systems, and natural resources.

Soviet scholarship, particularly works by historians such as M. Pokrovskii and S. Bronevskii, reinterpreted these events as "the forced inclusion of feudal





backward societies into the world economy,” consistent with Lenin’s theory of imperialism as the “highest stage of capitalism.”

5. Impact of Colonial Expansion on Central Asia

5.1 Political Transformation

Russian conquest dismantled traditional power structures. The local rulers (emirs and khans) were replaced or subordinated to Russian-appointed administrators. The Turkestan General-Governorate (established in 1867) became the central instrument of imperial governance.

While imperial officials described their rule as “benevolent administration,” local sources and later Soviet ethnographies reveal widespread discontent due to land seizures, taxation, and cultural repression. The imposition of Russian law and bureaucracy undermined indigenous governance systems.

5.2 Economic Restructuring

Under Russian control, Central Asia underwent significant economic transformation. Large tracts of land were converted into cotton plantations, often at the expense of subsistence agriculture. The introduction of railroads and irrigation systems integrated the region into the imperial market but also deepened economic dependency.

Soviet-era economic historians viewed this as a contradictory process: while it destroyed the traditional economy, it also laid the infrastructural groundwork for socialist industrialization in the twentieth century.

5.3 Cultural and Social Changes

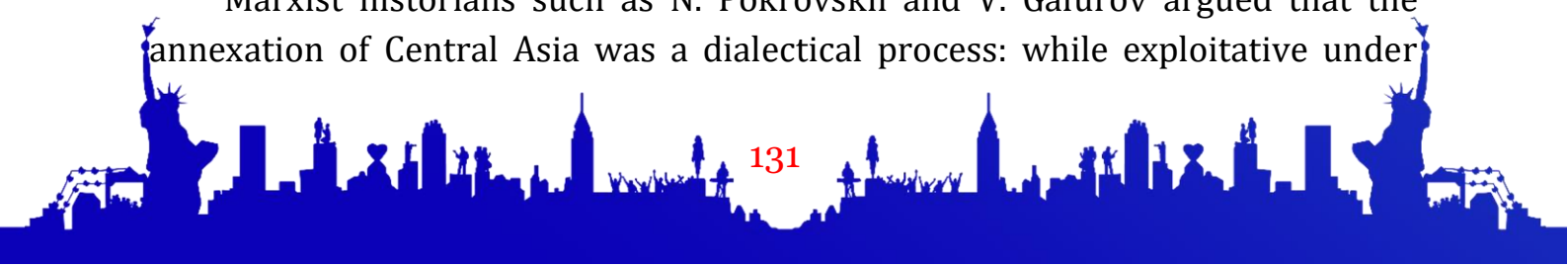
Russian rule introduced European-style education, architecture, and urban planning to cities like Tashkent, Samarkand, and Kokand. However, this modernization was uneven and primarily served colonial administration.

Soviet historians emphasized that despite Russian imperialism’s exploitative nature, it inadvertently accelerated the region’s transition from feudalism to capitalism—thus preparing it, in their view, for the eventual socialist transformation after 1917.

6. Soviet Historiographical Interpretations

During the Soviet period, the interpretation of Russian expansion underwent a significant transformation. The official narrative rejected the idea of imperialism as a purely oppressive force and redefined it as a “historically progressive process” that contributed to the unification of the peoples of the USSR.

Marxist historians such as N. Pokrovskii and V. Gafurov argued that the annexation of Central Asia was a dialectical process: while exploitative under





Tsarism, it paved the way for the revolutionary integration of the region into a socialist federation. This reinterpretation was instrumental in legitimizing Soviet rule, portraying it as the culmination of a long “historical friendship” between Russia and Central Asian peoples.

At the same time, the Soviet approach selectively silenced the colonial violence of the nineteenth century—mass killings, forced labor, and cultural assimilation—by emphasizing industrial and educational progress. As a result, Soviet historiography blended critique with justification, creating a hybrid narrative that served political needs rather than historical accuracy.

7. Conclusion

The nineteenth-century clash of colonial interests in Central Asia was shaped by a complex interplay of geopolitical, economic, and ideological factors. For the Russian Empire, the conquest of the region represented both a defensive strategy and a civilizational mission; for Britain, it was a geopolitical challenge that threatened its dominance in India.

The examination of Russian imperial sources reveals a consistent pattern of justifying expansion through the rhetoric of modernization and security, while Soviet historiography reframed these actions within a Marxist paradigm of historical progress. Despite the ideological differences, both perspectives shared a common assumption: that Central Asia’s development could only occur under external direction.

Understanding these narratives is essential for reassessing the region’s colonial legacy and the ways in which history was used to legitimize power. The Great Game, far from being a mere episode of nineteenth-century diplomacy, continues to influence modern geopolitical and cultural relations across Central Asia today.

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