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Resettlement and Living Conditions of Population Transferred from the Metropolis to Turkestan Oblast in the Russian Empire

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Abstract

This article discusses the resettlement and living conditions of populations relocated from the Russian Empire's metropolis to the Turkestan region. The information provided is based on historical facts, and terminology related to the period's history, which is used in various sources, is incorporated. The article explores the patterns of migration, the socio-economic conditions of settlers, and the imperial policies that influenced their integration into the region. By analyzing key historical documents and scholarly works, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the migration process during the imperial era, focusing specifically on the Seven Rivers area of Turkestan.

Keywords: Resettlement, Turkestan, Russian Empire, historical migration, socio-economic conditions, Seven Rivers, imperial policies.

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Introduction

Before the establishment of Turkestan oblast (on March 2, 1865), the Russian Empire began settling its population into various cities and military fortifications stretching from the borders of Orenburg and Western Siberia to the Tashkent region. These settlements included cities such as Kazalinsk, Akmachat (Perovsk), Turkestan, Verny, Ayagoz (Sergiopol), Jarkent, Tokmok, Korakul, Pishpak, Marki (Merke), Avliyota, Talas, and Chimkent, with Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians forming a substantial part of the incoming population. Organizationally relocated Cossacks from Ural and Western Siberia were settled in regions near the borders of Yettisuv and Issyk-Kul, near China .

Naturally, the settlers, who followed the Russian military, benefitted greatly from the military administration and the subsequent military-civilian governance system. For instance, between 1865 and 1868, Russian peasants moving to Turkestan were granted up to 100 desiatinas (109 hectares) of arable land and vast pastures, all free from taxes . The fertile lands and pastures, previously occupied by the local population, were allocated to Russian settlers, and as the military governor of Syrdarya oblast noted in 1891, "The entire postal route from Siberia to Tashkent now passes through Russian settlements, with no Russian settlements only 84 versts from Chimkent" .

The Tsarist and colonial administration favored the migration of prosperous peasants, and by the 1870s, the systematic settlement of Russian peasants became more organized. However, the number of indigenous peoples who moved independently was relatively small . To facilitate this migration, the imperial authorities provided significant assistance to Orthodox Christian settlers, particularly those who had completed their military service and wished to settle in Turkestan .

In the early stages of turning Turkestan into a colony, the population transfer process appeared disorderly and spontaneous. However, Russian imperial circles had clear goals for this migration: they aimed to prevent the migration of Muslim populations from Crimea, the Caucasus, and the Volga region, and strategically placed Cossacks and Russian peasants near military garrisons and along main roads . Every family of Cossacks or Russian peasants was provided with around 10–15 desiatinas of arable land, exempted from various taxes, and given additional privileges. While ensuring these peasants could provide a certain number of armed men when needed, the administration closely monitored the land redistribution process, particularly with respect to wheat-growing lands .

Moreover, the Russian authorities prioritized the relocation of Germans and Christian dissenters (Raskolniks), who were denied many of the benefits extended to other settlers, such as tax exemptions and land allocations. This reflects the imperial policy of resource allocation based on social, ethnic, and religious hierarchies, demonstrating the entrenched bias within the colonial administration's strategies .

Prior to the establishment of Turkestan oblast on March 2, 1865, the Russian Empire began settling its population in various cities and military fortifications stretching from Orenburg and Western Siberia to the Tashkent region. These settlements, including cities such as Kazalinsk, Akmachat (Perovsk), Turkestan, Verny, Ayagoz (Sergiopol), Jarkent, Tokmok, Korakul, Pishpak, Marki (Merke), Avliyota, Talas, and Chimkent, saw the arrival of a substantial population of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians. Additionally, Cossacks, organizationally relocated from Ural and Western Siberia, were placed near the borders of Yettisuv and Issyk-Kul, adjacent to China.

Naturally, the settlers followed the Russian military and benefitted from a military-civilian governance system. Russian peasants moving to Turkestan between 1865 and 1868 were granted up to 100 desiatinas (109 hectares) of arable land and vast pastures, exempt from taxes. These lands, previously utilized by the local population, were redistributed to the settlers. The military governor of Syrdarya oblast, in a 1891 report, noted that "the entire postal route from Siberia to Tashkent passes through Russian settlements, with no Russian settlements within 84 versts of Chimkent."

The Tsarist administration actively promoted the migration of wealthy peasants, and by the 1870s, the migration process became more organized. However, most of the indigenous population did not participate in this movement. Instead, the Russian imperial authorities provided significant assistance to Orthodox Christian settlers, particularly those who had completed their military service and wished to settle in Turkestan.

This population transfer process, which seemed disorganized at first, had clear goals. The imperial authorities sought to prevent Muslim migration from Crimea, the Caucasus, and the Volga region, and strategically placed Cossacks and Russian peasants near military garrisons and along vital roads. Each family of Cossacks and Russian peasants was allocated approximately 10–15 desiatinas of arable land, exempt from taxes and other duties. In return, they were required to provide a specified number of armed men when needed. The administration closely supervised the redistribution of these lands, especially wheat-growing regions.

The imperial administration also prioritized the relocation of Germans and Christian dissenters (Raskolniks), who were denied many of the benefits granted to other settlers, such as tax exemptions and land grants. This demonstrates how Russian imperial policies were shaped by social, ethnic, and religious hierarchies, with significant impact on the indigenous population’s rights and access to resources.

However, due to the inability of both the Russian ruling circles and the internal provincial authorities to mitigate the consequences of the abolition of serfdom, the primary directions and methods for developing the capitalist economy in the metropolis were established. As a result, the Tsarist government decided to expand the scope of resettling Russian peasants and other representatives of various social strata to Turkestan and the Dashte-OLka regions. It was also deemed appropriate to not only permit the settlement of Orthodox Russian citizens but also other Christian Russians in the area. To this end, on July 13, 1889, Emperor Alexander III signed a law regarding "the relocation of rural inhabitants or petty bourgeois to state lands and the settlement of previously relocated individuals to specific areas." However, after several significant uprisings by the indigenous population, the Russian ruling circles, particularly in Turkestan and Central Asia, became concerned about maintaining their position and introduced new policies.

These new regulations allowed for the relocation of property- and economically-secured Christian peasants to these colonies. Thus, by the 1890s, the Tsarist and Turkestan administrations, not only established military garrisons and Cossack settlements near the borders with Afghanistan, Iran, and China but also initiated large-scale relocation of Orthodox Christian, Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian peasants. The favorable climate, abundant wealth, and fertile land in Turkestan were widely known in Russia, which further facilitated the migration of merchants, industrialists, poor workers, and peasants to the region. The Tsarist authorities expanded the settlement of Russian citizens in Turkestan by passing specific laws in 1881, and later in 1883, 1886, and 1889, further promoting the relocation of Russian populations to the region.

In terms of the proportion of Russian population to the indigenous population in Turkestan oblasts, by 1897, the Russian population in the Yettisuv oblast made up 9.66% (95,465 people), 8.7% (33,273 people) in the Caspian region, 3.03% (44,834 people) in Syrdarya oblast, 1.63% (14,006 people) in Samarkand oblast, and only 0.63% (9,842 people) in Fergana oblast. After the Andijan uprising, nearly 4,000 Russian peasants were resettled to the Fergana region in just two years. The authorities, well aware of the necessity to ensure not only the material but also the cultural superiority of the relocated population, handled the issue seriously to make them reliable supporters of colonial rule.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Tsarist administration, considering the unique political and social circumstances in the region, sought to actively engage the wealth of Turkestan for the benefit of Russian interests, thereby strengthening imperial dominance in the region. The resettlement policy, particularly the relocation of Russian citizens, resulted in significant changes in the economy and taxation systems in Turkestan. Moreover, following the Andijan uprising, the Tsarist regime escalated its policy of relocating Russian populations to both Turkestan and the Dashte-OLka region in the early 20th century.

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