



THE IMPORTANCE OF RAILWAY CONSTRUCTION IN THE ECONOMY OF THE BUKHARA EMIRATE

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Abstract:

This article explores the significance of railway construction in the economic development of the Bukhara Emirate during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It analyzes how the establishment of railways contributed to the growth of trade, the expansion of markets, and the integration of the emirate into regional and international economic systems. The study also highlights the social and political implications of railway development, including the influence of Russian imperial policies and the modernization of transportation infrastructure. By examining historical sources and economic data, the article provides a comprehensive understanding of the transformative role of railways in the Bukhara Emirate's economy.

Keywords: Bukhara Emirate, railway construction, economic development, trade, modernization, Russian Empire, Central Asia, infrastructure.

Introduction

After the Russian Empire conquered vast territories of the Central Asian khanates, it firmly established its dominance in the region and, from the last quarter of the 19th century, began to pay special attention to strengthening its political and economic position there.

Among the key initiatives undertaken in this regard was the construction of railways across Central Asia, which played a crucial role in consolidating Russian authority. The railway policy pursued by the imperial government was one of the most significant measures aimed at reinforcing its control over the Turkestan region.



The issue of railway construction in Turkestan was primarily raised from political, military-strategic, and economic perspectives. The Russian Empire sought not only to tighten its control over the populations of Turkestan, the Bukhara Emirate, and the Khiva Khanate through various means, but also to secure its influence in the East. This was largely motivated by the desire to prevent the expansion of British interests into Central Asia by all possible means.

It is well known that the complete annexation of the Kokand Khanate and the partial subjugation of the Bukhara and Khiva Khanates intensified the rivalry between Russia and Britain, particularly regarding the political situation in the Near East. This geopolitical tension persisted even after the signing of formal agreements between the two powers.

Both the British and the Russian empires made vigorous efforts to expand their spheres of influence and strengthen their positions in Central Asia. The rivalry between Britain and Russia, often referred to as the "Great Game," became particularly intense and confrontational by the late 1870s.

Between 1878 and 1880, Britain violated existing treaties and agreements with Russia by launching the Second Anglo-Afghan War, an action that further deepened tensions between the two powers. In response, the Russian government adopted urgent measures to counter British influence and focused on consolidating its control over Turkestan. During this period, the strategic importance of constructing a railway linking Russia with Turkestan became increasingly evident to the Russian authorities. The necessity of building a railway between Russia and Turkestan arose primarily from political and military-strategic considerations. However, several economic factors also played a decisive role. The Russian bourgeoisie viewed Turkestan as a vital source of raw materials and a vast internal market for selling manufactured goods. Recognizing these economic advantages, Russian industrial and commercial circles strongly advocated for the construction of a railway. From the 1880s onward, they persistently pressured the imperial government to implement this project.

The traditional caravan routes, which had previously served as the main channels of trade, were slow, inefficient, and costly. Therefore, the establishment of a railway network was seen as an essential step toward reducing transportation expenses, accelerating the movement of goods, and integrating Turkestan more effectively into the economic system of the Russian Empire.



For instance, a caravan traveling from Orenburg to Tashkent would need approximately 90 to 100 days to complete the journey. The return trip from Tashkent to Orenburg required at least three months, while transporting goods to Moscow or Nizhny Novgorod could take as long as five to six months. In addition, the cost of hiring each camel amounted to between 9 and 12 rubles, and a single camel could carry up to 16 poods of cargo. From an economic standpoint, the transportation cost per pood averaged around 56–57 kopecks.

By the 1880s, it became increasingly evident that the traditional caravan routes could no longer meet the demands of the time — neither in terms of cost efficiency, speed, nor the requirements of the Russian bourgeoisie and military authorities. These shortcomings highlighted the urgent necessity of constructing railways across Central Asia. The high cost of goods, logistical inefficiencies, and growing trade demands collectively pushed the issue of railway construction to the forefront of governmental and economic agendas.

Thus, the penetration of railways into Central Asia was driven primarily by a combination of political, military-strategic, and economic factors. The idea of building a railway in the region had emerged even before the Russian conquest of Central Asia. During the 1850s and 1860s, when railway construction projects were being developed across the Russian Empire, the possibility of extending such infrastructure into Central Asia was also discussed. However, at that time, the proposal remained merely theoretical.

The initiative for railway construction in Central Asia was particularly supported by Russian administrative officials stationed in Turkestan, who recognized its strategic and economic significance. They repeatedly appealed to the imperial government to address the issue. In 1873, the Governor-General of Turkestan, General von Kaufman, submitted a formal written request to the Tsarist government, urging the construction of a railway line into Central Asia. In his letter, Kaufman explicitly identified the intensifying Anglo-Russian rivalry as the main reason for this proposal.

General von Kaufman emphasized that the construction of the Central Asian railway was of utmost importance primarily to curb and weaken British interests in the region, as well as to prevent any potential military operations that Britain might undertake in Central Asia and to enable Russia to respond swiftly if such actions occurred.



In 1880, General Kaufman sent a telegram to the Minister of War, stressing the urgency of accelerating the railway project, particularly from a military-strategic perspective. In his message, he wrote:

“Your Excellency, I earnestly request your direct intervention to expedite the implementation of the Central Asian Railway project, which has already been approved and supported by the Ministry of Railways. It must be emphasized that this railway construction is not only essential for the economic development of the region—which indeed will largely depend upon it—and could transform Turkestan into one of the empire’s most productive industrial centers, but it also bears great military and political significance. Should the construction of this railway fail to materialize, we risk losing the strategic advantages, influence, and stronghold we have gained in Asia.”

General Kaufman’s well-founded proposal was positively received and supported by the Ministry of War, which subsequently submitted related recommendations to the imperial government.

It is noteworthy that following these initiatives, in 1873, a special commission was established under the Ministry of Railways in St. Petersburg to review and discuss railway construction projects in Central Asia. This marked a significant step toward the realization of the Central Asian railway, which would later play a crucial role in strengthening the Russian Empire’s political, military, and economic influence in the region.

Following the establishment of this special commission, numerous railway construction proposals linking Central Asia with Russia began to be submitted by both Russian engineers and foreign specialists. Between 1865 and 1880, more than forty such projects were proposed, with the majority presented during the 1870s.

Ultimately, the Tsarist government was compelled to support and initiate the construction of a railway network in Central Asia. The first plan envisioned a railway line extending from Orenburg to Tashkent. However, the growing tensions between Britain and Russia along the Afghan–Central Asian frontier forced the Russian government to temporarily suspend the Orenburg–Tashkent railway project and redirect its focus toward the construction of the Trans-Caspian Railway.

On February 11–12, 1880, a special council convened under the leadership of the Minister of War to discuss the Trans-Caspian issue in detail. During this meeting, a decision was made to commence the construction of the railway. The first section of



the Trans-Caspian Railway—from Mikhailov Bay to Kyzyl-Arvat, covering a distance of 217 versts—was completed within an exceptionally short period of just eight months and subsequently opened for operation.

The successful completion of this project demonstrated to the Tsarist government not only its ability to undertake large-scale infrastructure and economic initiatives but also reinforced its confidence in the strategic military importance of railway construction. The Trans-Caspian Railway, in particular, played a crucial role in strengthening Russia's military and political positions in Central Asia and laid the groundwork for the future expansion of the empire's transport and trade networks in the region.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the construction of railways in Central Asia, particularly during the late 19th century, represented a turning point in the region's political, economic, and strategic transformation under Tsarist Russia. Initially motivated by military and geopolitical considerations—chiefly to counter British influence during the “Great Game”—the railway projects soon became instrumental in the economic integration and administrative consolidation of the region.

The initiatives of Russian officials such as General von Kaufman, along with the growing pressure from industrial and commercial circles, underscored the multifaceted importance of railway construction. These efforts not only strengthened Russia's military presence in Central Asia but also facilitated the rapid movement of troops, goods, and information across vast territories that had previously relied on inefficient caravan routes.

From an economic standpoint, the introduction of railway infrastructure significantly reduced transportation costs, accelerated trade flows, and linked the resource-rich territories of Turkestan and the Bukhara Emirate with the industrial centers of the Russian Empire. The completion of early projects such as the Trans-Caspian Railway demonstrated the empire's engineering capacity and marked the beginning of a new era of modernization and colonial integration in Central Asia.

Thus, the construction of railways was not merely a technological achievement but a deliberate imperial strategy that reshaped the economic landscape of the region and solidified Russia's dominance. The legacy of these developments continued to influence the socio-economic evolution of Central Asia well into the 20th century.



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