

THE RISE OF THE RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE PRESS IN TURKESTAN (1870–1917)

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Abstract. This article explores the emergence of the Russian-language press in Turkestan from the 1870s to the early twentieth century. The founding of *Turkestanskije vedomosti* in 1870 marked the beginning of official Russian-language periodicals, which primarily served the administrative and ideological needs of the Tsarist regime. While functioning as a tool of colonial governance and Russification, the press also reflected wider intellectual and political currents, including the circulation of revolutionary ideas and the rise of national-bourgeois newspapers after 1905. By situating the press within the socio-political context of late imperial Turkestan, the article highlights its dual role as both an instrument of empire and a medium of cultural exchange.

Keywords: Russian-language press; Turkestan; colonial policy; Russification; *Turkestanskije vedomosti*; N. P. Ostroumov; Orientalists; imperial administration; national-bourgeois press; late 19th – early 20th century.

РАСЦВЕТ РУССКОЯЗЫЧНОЙ ПЕЧАТИ В ТУРКЕСТАНЕ (1870–1917)

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается становление русскоязычной прессы в Туркестане с 1870-х годов до начала XX века. Основание «Туркестанских ведомостей» в 1870 году ознаменовало начало официальной русскоязычной периодики, которая в первую очередь обслуживала административные и идеологические нужды царского режима. Выступая в качестве инструмента колониального управления и русификации, пресса также отражала более широкие интеллектуальные и политические течения, включая распространение революционных идей и рост национально-буржуазных газет после 1905 года. Рассматривая прессу в социально-политическом контексте позднеимперского Туркестана, статья подчёркивает её двойную роль: как инструмента империи и как средства культурного обмена.

Ключевые слова: Русскоязычная Пресса; Туркестан; Колониальная Политика; Русификация; «Туркестанские Ведомости»; Н. П. Остроумов; Ориенталисты; Царская Администрация; Национально-Буржуазная Пресса; Конец XIX – Начало XX Века.

Introduction

The introduction of the Russian-language press into Turkestan in the second half of the nineteenth century was closely linked with the imperial expansion of the Russian Empire in Central Asia. The conquest of Tashkent in 1865 and the subsequent establishment of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship (1867) created the administrative and political framework within which Russian officials sought to institutionalize control not only militarily and bureaucratically, but also ideologically through the medium of the press.

Scholars often maintain that the Russian-language press in Turkestan, particularly in areas such as Northern Tajikistan, began to develop only after the Soviet regime consolidated its authority. Yet a closer examination of historical evidence shows that the emergence of Russian-language publishing in the region predates this period. The establishment of printing houses and

the appearance of official publications can be traced back to 1870, shortly after much of Central Asia was incorporated into the Russian Empire and the Turkestan Governor-Generalship was created in 1868.

The first issue of *Turkestanskije vedomosti* (*Turkestan Regional Gazette*), recognized as the earliest newspaper in Central Asia, appeared on 28 April 1870. While the newspaper was primarily an instrument of Tsarist administrative policy, aimed at disseminating official information to the population, its role was not confined to this function. The publication also carried materials on the region's economic, social, and cultural developments, and it regularly featured essays exploring the historical experiences of local communities (*Turkestanskije vedomosti*, 1871, issues 15, 17, 21). In addition, several articles were devoted to the ethnographic characteristics of the Tajik people, reflecting the newspaper's broader engagement with the study of local traditions and society.

The newspaper soon became a platform that drew the interest of several distinguished Orientalists, among them V. V. Bartold, A. G. Grebenkin, A. P. Fedchenko, and V. F. Oshanin, who maintained active cooperation with the editorial team [1: 27; 2:31-32]. Among its regular contributors, Nikolai Petrovich Ostroumov stands out as a particularly influential figure. Having recently graduated from the Kazan Theological Academy, he was already recognized as a promising young intellectual and was permitted to lecture at the academy itself. Parallel to this, he engaged in pedagogical work at local theological and teacher-training seminaries, where he taught subjects such as history and geography. The majority of Ostroumov's contributions to the paper reflected a pronounced religious and missionary agenda, underscoring the ideological orientation of much of his scholarship.

The publication history of *Turkestanskije vedomosti* (*Turkestan Regional Gazette*) is well documented: its final issue appeared in mid-December 1917. Throughout its forty-seven years of existence, the size of its print run fluctuated considerably, ranging between one and three thousand copies.

Scholars analyzing the development of the Russian-language press in Turkestan from 1870 onward often identify three major stages. The first corresponds to the founding of official periodicals under direct Tsarist patronage. The second reflects the spread of revolutionary newspapers such as *Iskra*, *Vpered*, *Proletarii*, and *Novaya zhizn*, which found circulation in cities including Samarkand, Bukhara, Khujand, and Uroteppa. The third stage, emerging after the Revolution of 1905, saw the rise of a national-bourgeois press, with Russian-language titles also appearing within this trend [1: 65].

Nevertheless, it may be argued that the second of these stages should not be regarded as an autonomous phase in the evolution of the regional press. This is because the revolutionary periodicals of the time were not locally founded or produced but rather introduced into the region from external sources, their circulation reflecting importation rather than indigenous journalistic development.

During the years of the First World War, the presence of national-bourgeois newspapers in Turkestan expanded noticeably. Archival statistics demonstrate a dynamic pattern: in 1915, seventeen Russian-language periodicals were issued in the region; by 1916 this number had grown to nineteen, but by 1917 it had declined to thirteen [2: 109]. In total, between 1870 and 1917,

roughly 170 Russian-language periodicals were published across Turkestan, more than eighty of which were newspapers. Their geographical distribution, however, was uneven, reflecting both demographic and political priorities of the Tsarist regime. Publications appeared in Margilan (8 titles), Vernyi and Kokand (10 each), Ashgabat (23), Samarkand (24), and most prominently, Tashkent, which hosted more than 80 titles [2: 155].

The predominance of Tashkent as a publishing center is hardly coincidental. As the administrative seat of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship, the city enjoyed both infrastructural advantages - printing facilities, postal communications, and educational institutions - and political significance as a hub of colonial governance. This concentration of resources created an environment in which both official and semi-official periodicals could flourish, thereby reinforcing the city's role as the intellectual and cultural center of the region under Russian rule. By contrast, peripheral cities such as Margilan or Khujand produced far fewer publications, a fact that illustrates the uneven diffusion of print culture and the centralizing tendencies of imperial policy. It is also noteworthy that Khujand, which later became part of Tajikistan, developed its own contribution to this landscape of Russian-language publishing. A striking example is the journal *Krasnoe solnyshko* (*The Red Sun*), established in 1909 under the initiative of V. G. Ryk-Bogdanovich. Although modest in scale, this periodical reflects the broader trend of localized publishing efforts in the early twentieth century, which supplemented the dominant centers by providing outlets for intellectual activity in smaller cities.

Taken together, these figures and examples reveal several important tendencies. First, they underscore the extent to which the Russian colonial administration relied on the press not only as a mechanism of political control but also as a means of cultural and social influence. Second, the fluctuations in the number of periodicals during the war years demonstrate the vulnerability of the press to broader political and economic crises. Finally, the existence of Russian-language periodicals outside major centers suggests that, by the early twentieth century, the infrastructure of print had begun to penetrate deeper into the social fabric of Turkestan, albeit unevenly and under conditions of colonial dependence.

Many of the official and bourgeois periodicals in Turkestan functioned primarily as instruments for legitimizing the existing order, openly supporting the policies of the Tsarist regime and later those of the Provisional Government. Yet one publication stands out as a particularly illustrative case - *Turkestanskaia tuzemnaia gazeta* (*Turkestan Native Newspaper*), edited by Nikolai Ostroumov between 1883 and 1917. Despite being administered under his direction, it cannot be regarded as a fully Russian-language newspaper in essence. Rather, it was issued in the languages of the local population but was conceived as a vehicle of Tsarist

Russification policy, serving to disseminate propaganda in favor of the Orthodox monarchy. Interestingly, the paper was not confined solely to loyalist propaganda. On occasion, its pages featured sharp criticisms of Tsarist officials, including articles exposing the stifling effects of bureaucratic administration on regional life and the pervasive corruption among Tashkent officials [3: 260]. This ambivalence reveals that even publications tied closely to imperial authority could sometimes provide space for dissenting or critical voices, whether intentionally or as a consequence of the contradictions inherent in colonial governance.

Ostroumov's personal agenda, however, was unmistakable. He consistently positioned himself as an advocate of spreading Russian culture and Orthodoxy among the Muslim peoples of the region. His well-known book *Sarty* articulated this view most explicitly, where he argued that the "civilizing" of the local population could only be achieved through the acceptance of the Orthodox faith [4: 265–269]. For Ostroumov, religious conversion was not merely a spiritual matter but a central component of cultural assimilation and loyalty to the empire. The February and October Revolutions of 1917, however, radically altered the political environment. Ostroumov came to realize that his long-standing vision of Russification no longer resonated with the local population, nor did it carry the political weight it once had. Consequently, he chose to leave Turkestan and return to Russia, effectively marking the end of his decades-long effort to shape the intellectual and cultural climate of the region through the press.

Conclusion

In summary, *Turkestanskaia tuzemnaia gazeta* largely reproduced, in the vernacular languages of Central Asia, the ideological content already promoted by *Turkestanskii vedomosti*. While its principal mission was to defend the interests of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship and to advance the imperial project of Russification, it nevertheless at times provided space for pointed critiques of administrative malpractice. This duality illustrates both the adaptability of the colonial press and the tensions that arose when imperial propaganda encountered the lived realities of Turkestan society.

The emergence of the Russian-language press in Turkestan should be understood as a process shaped by the interplay of **imperial policy, settler society, and local dynamics**. It laid the groundwork for the broader press culture of the region, influencing not only Russian-speaking readers but also indirectly affecting the rise of native-language publications that emerged in response most notably the Jadid press of the early twentieth century.

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