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“With Utmost Diligence and without Misstep... ”: Contribution of Russian Merchants to the Socio-Cultural, Economic, and Political Development of Central Asia in the First Half of the 19th Century

Abstract

The study involves analysis of the participation of merchants in the process of establishing channels of political, cultural, and economic exchange between the Russian Empire, the Asian khanates, and the Kazakh steppe in the first half of the 19th century. The modern government practice of involving private sector in order to strengthen international relations makes retrospective analysis of cooperation between business representatives and officials in solving national problems more relevant. The study is to identify specific examples of entrepreneurs' efforts in promoting Russia's diverse interests in Asia and to demonstrate specifics of merchants' work in execution of special assignments of the imperial authorities. The value of the article lies in the fact that the existing corpus of scientific works is mainly focused on the activities of merchants in collecting intelligence (i.e., specific espionage for Russia), while acculturational, mediatory, and clerical service of merchants remains outside the scope of national historiography's attention. Its novelty is confirmed by the fact that the examination of this problem drawing on the materials of the Orenburg gubernia of the 19th century is being carried out for the first time. The article draws on documents from fond 6 (Office of the Orenburg military governor) of the Joint State Archive of Orenburg Oblast (OGA OO). To assess the contribution of individuals to the multidimensional process of the Russian Empire's interaction and rapprochement with the Asian region in the 19th century, anthropological approach has been chosen as a methodological mechanism specially adapted to studying the problem of the "small man." The application of the latest methodological concept of "imperial policy of acculturation" provides a better understanding of historical significance and specifics of economic, trade, political, and cultural contacts of nomadic population of the Kazakh steppe and settled culture of the khanates of Central Asia with business community of the Russian state. The merchants' main area of responsibility was diplomatic, requiring their participation in resolving internecine conflicts of Kazakh clans, as well as search and ransom of the Russians held captive in Central Asia. The authorities' key criteria in recruitment of entrepreneurs were their foreign trade success, which implied useful acquaintances in Central Asian cities and in camps of the Kazakh nomads, knowledge of the neighboring peoples' languages, and advanced communication skills. The study may be useful to scientists studying the history of merchants in the 18th-19th centuries, issues of Russia's interaction with the states of Asia in the pre-revolutionary period, as well as specialists in regional history.

Keywords

Russian merchants, Central Asia, special assignments, Russian authorities, nomads, Turkic languages, special skills, intermediaries, service to state, customs, military governor, Kazakh Khan, historical sources, archival documents.

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