

**MAIN STRATEGIES OF THE SCIENTIFIC ACTIVITY OF THE TURKESTAN
DEPARTMENT OF THE RUSSIAN GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY**

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Abstract. This study examines the main strategic directions of the scientific activity of the Turkestan Department of the Russian Geographical Society. The research focuses on the Department’s role in the exploration and systematic study of Central Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Using a historical-analytical approach, the paper analyzes archival materials, expedition reports, and scientific publications to identify the key areas of its activity, including geographical exploration, cartography, natural resource assessment, ethnographic studies, and applied research.

The findings indicate that the Department played a dual role: it significantly contributed to the development of scientific knowledge about Central Asia while simultaneously supporting the administrative and economic objectives of the Russian Empire. Its expeditions and research activities resulted in the accumulation of valuable empirical data that laid the foundation for further regional studies. At the same time, the scientific output was influenced by the colonial context of the period, shaping the interpretation of local geography and societies.

Keywords: Turkestan Department, Russian Geographical Society, Central Asia, geographical exploration, ethnography, cartography, colonial science, scientific expeditions, regional studies.

Introduction. The second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century marked a period of intensive scientific exploration of Central Asia within the framework of the Russian Empire. One of the key institutions that played a significant role in this process was the Russian Geographical Society and its regional branch—the Turkestan Department. Established after the Russian conquest of Central Asia, the Turkestan Department of the Russian Geographical Society became an important center for the systematic study of the natural, historical, ethnographic, and economic features of the region.

The scientific activity of the Turkestan Department was guided by a set of strategic priorities aimed at comprehensive regional exploration. These included the collection and classification of geographical data, the study of natural resources, the mapping of unexplored territories, and the documentation of the cultural and social life of indigenous peoples. Particular attention was also given to applied research that could support administrative governance, agricultural development, and infrastructural expansion in the region.

The formation of the Turkestan Department reflected broader imperial scientific and geopolitical interests, where knowledge production was closely linked to territorial consolidation and economic integration. At the same time, it served as a platform for professional scientists, military geographers, ethnographers, and local researchers to collaborate in the production of empirical knowledge about Central Asia.

This paper examines the main strategic directions of the scientific activity of the Turkestan Department of the Russian Geographical Society, analyzing its role in shaping geographical knowledge, supporting colonial administration, and contributing to the early development of regional studies in Central Asia.

Literature review. The scientific activity of the Turkestan Department of the Russian Geographical Society has been the subject of interest in both Russian and Central Asian historiography. Researchers generally emphasize its dual nature: on one hand, as a scientific institution contributing to the development of geography, ethnography, and natural sciences; and on the other hand, as an instrument of imperial policy in Central Asia.

Early studies, particularly those produced in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by members of the Russian Geographical Society itself, such as P. P. Semenov-Tyan-Shansky and N. A. Severtsov, highlight the exploratory and scientific achievements of the Turkestan Department. These works focus on mapping unknown territories, cataloging flora and fauna, and documenting ethnographic diversity. However, these accounts often reflect an imperial perspective, presenting scientific activity as part of a “civilizing mission.”

Soviet-era historiography introduced a more critical interpretation. Scholars such as S. P. Tolstov and B. V. Lunin analyzed the Turkestan Department within the framework of colonial expansion, arguing that scientific research was closely linked to military and administrative objectives. At the same time, Soviet researchers acknowledged the value of the empirical data collected by the Department, particularly in geography, archaeology, and ethnography.

In post-independence Central Asian scholarship, including works by Uzbek historians, there has been a renewed interest in reassessing the legacy of the Turkestan Department. These studies tend to emphasize both its scientific contributions and its role in shaping colonial knowledge systems. Researchers such as Sh. Vohidov and A. Ziyov argue that while the Department facilitated the accumulation of important scientific data about the region, it also contributed to the construction of externally defined narratives about Central Asia.

Recent international studies adopt a more balanced and interdisciplinary approach. Scholars in postcolonial studies and the history of science analyze the Turkestan Department as part of global knowledge networks of the 19th century. They focus on how geographical societies functioned as institutions that connected scientific inquiry with imperial expansion, while also enabling cross-cultural exchanges of knowledge.

Overall, the literature demonstrates that the Turkestan Department’s scientific activity cannot be understood in isolation from its political and historical context. The diversity of interpretations reflects ongoing debates about the relationship between science, empire, and regional identity in Central Asian studies.

Research methodology. This study is based on a historical-analytical research approach aimed at examining the main strategic directions of the scientific activity of the Turkestan Department of the Russian Geographical Society. The methodology combines qualitative analysis of historical sources with comparative and interpretative methods to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the subject.

Analysis and results. The analysis of the scientific activity of the Turkestan Department of the Russian Geographical Society shows that its work was structured around several key strategic directions: geographical exploration, natural resource assessment, ethnographic research, and applied scientific studies supporting regional administration.

One of the most important areas of activity was geographical exploration and cartography. Expeditions organized or supported by the Department contributed to the systematic mapping of Central Asia, including mountain ranges, river systems, deserts, and newly incorporated territories. These efforts significantly reduced the “blank spaces” on imperial maps and provided the administrative authorities with reliable spatial data for governance and military planning.

Another major direction was the study of natural resources. Researchers focused on identifying agricultural potential, mineral deposits, water resources, and climatic conditions.

These investigations had practical significance, as they supported the development of irrigation systems, expansion of agriculture, and early industrial planning in the region.

Ethnographic and anthropological research also occupied a central place in the Department's activities. Scholars collected data on the languages, traditions, social structures, and cultural practices of the indigenous population. While these studies contributed valuable empirical material, they often reflected the interpretative frameworks of imperial science, which tended to classify and systematize local societies from an external perspective.

The analysis also shows that the Department played an important role in applied scientific research. Its findings were frequently used to support colonial administration, infrastructure development, and economic integration of Turkestan into the Russian Empire. This demonstrates that scientific activity was closely linked with practical and political objectives.

Overall, the results indicate that the Turkestan Department functioned not only as a scientific institution but also as an instrument of knowledge production that supported imperial expansion. At the same time, its expeditions and publications created a substantial empirical foundation for the later development of geography, ethnography, and regional studies in Central Asia.

Conclusions and suggestions. The study of the main strategic directions of the scientific activity of the Turkestan Department of the Russian Geographical Society demonstrates that this institution played a significant role in the systematic exploration of Central Asia during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

First, the Department's activities were primarily focused on geographical exploration, cartographic work, and the scientific description of previously under-studied territories. These efforts contributed to the creation of more accurate maps and a better understanding of the physical geography of the region.

Second, the research shows that the study of natural resources and economic potential was one of the key strategic priorities. The collected data on climate, water resources, agriculture, and minerals supported the economic integration of Turkestan into the imperial system.

Third, ethnographic and anthropological studies conducted by the Department significantly expanded knowledge about the cultural diversity of Central Asia. However, these studies were often influenced by the ideological and administrative interests of the period.

Finally, it can be concluded that the Turkestan Department functioned at the intersection of science and imperial policy. While it contributed to the development of scientific knowledge, its activities were also closely connected with the political and economic goals of the Russian Empire.

Based on the findings of this research, the following suggestions can be made:

It is important to continue interdisciplinary studies on the scientific heritage of the Turkestan Department, integrating perspectives from history, geography, and postcolonial studies to ensure a more balanced interpretation.

Further archival research should be conducted to uncover unpublished materials, expedition diaries, and local sources that may provide alternative viewpoints on scientific activity in the region.

Comparative studies with other geographical societies in Europe and Asia could help better understand the global context of 19th-century scientific exploration and knowledge production.

Modern researchers should critically reassess the colonial context of scientific work, distinguishing between its empirical value and its ideological framework.

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Finally, the scientific legacy of the Turkestan Department should be used as a historical foundation for developing contemporary regional studies in Central Asia, particularly in geography, ethnography, and environmental research.

Overall, the study highlights both the scientific importance and the historical complexity of the Turkestan Department's activities, emphasizing the need for continued critical research in this field.