

The Colonial Policy of the Russian Empire Through the Memoirs of K.K. Palen

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Abstract

This article examines Senator K.K. Palen's memoirs, *Mission to Turkestan* (1908–1909), as an important source for the history of colonial Turkestan in the early twentieth century. Drawing on Palen's personal observations, it analyzes the political, socio-economic, and cultural conditions of the region, and provides a critical assessment of the colonial administration, resettlement policies, attitudes toward the local population, and the professional competence of officials. Palen's memoirs complement the official 20-volume senatorial inspection reports and offer insight into the character and perspective of an imperial official.

Keywords: Colonial Turkestan, Memoirs, Inspection, Administration, Resettlement Policy, Ethnography, Socio-Economic History, Russian Empire.

1. Introduction

Within the documentary heritage on the history of colonial Turkestan in the early twentieth century, there exists an important historical source that sheds light on the region's past. This is the memoir of Senator K.K. Palen, *Mission to Turkestan*, in which he describes his impressions of his journey to Turkestan in 1908–1909 as part of a senatorial inspection. These memoirs significantly supplement and enrich the facts and events presented in his official 20-volume reports [1].

The memoirs of K.K. Palen consist of an introduction, seven parts (I. Tashkent; II. Samarkand; III. Bukhara; IV. Fergana; V. Transcaspia; VI. Khiva; VII. Semirechye), and notes. They contain vivid and detailed descriptions of the natural environment of the Turkestan region, as well as K.K. Palen's observations of the behavior of the local population and officials of the colonial administration. The memoirs provide contemporary readers with valuable insights into the region's economy, history, cultural life, and system of governance, as well as into the vassal states, the Emirate of Bukhara and the Khanate of Khiva [2].

Unlike the official, dry reports, rich in information on the results of the inspection, the memoirs are written in a different style: softer and more lyrical, yet containing rather sharp criticism of the local administration and central authorities, particularly the Resettlement

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Administration. In them, the personality of the senator is more fully revealed: he appears not only as an official wholly devoted to the empire, but also as an educated and thoughtful individual [3].

2. Research Method

This study employs a comprehensive scientific approach to examine the history of colonial Central Asia in the early twentieth century. The primary sources include Senator K.K. Palen's memoirs, *Mission to Turkestan (1908–1909)*, as well as his official 20-volume inspection reports [4]. In the course of the study, the historical-analytical method was used as the main approach, enabling an examination of the facts and observations presented in Palen's memoirs in relation to the political, socio-economic, and cultural conditions of the period. The comparative-analytical method was applied to identify similarities and differences between the memoirs and the official reports, as well as to assess the author's subjective perspective. In addition, a source-critical approach was employed to analyze Palen's memoirs as a historical source, with particular attention to the reliability and scholarly significance of the information they contain. Methods of generalization and systematization were also used to synthesize the findings into coherent conceptual conclusions [5].

3. Results and Discussion

K.K. Palen expresses his personal view on the low professional level of officials within the colonial administration [6]. He was deeply troubled by the realization that power in the region was in the hands of unworthy individuals. As he wrote, he was often struck by the thought that "the people of the Turkestan region lack proper leadership; instead, they are governed by bureaucrats and idlers in offices in Saint Petersburg and Tashkent, who dismiss or reject all proposals and reports from those directly familiar with the region's local conditions and problems" [7].

During his travels, while studying the everyday life of the region, K.K. Palen, despite his firm belief, as a colonial official, in the civilizing mission of Russia in Turkestan, began to reflect on the actual role of the Europeans who had arrived and their impact on the fate of the local population. "I often asked myself", he wrote, "what have we Europeans brought to this land besides a few technical means? Were these people happier before the arrival of Europeans? Who is responsible for the destruction of ethical and moral norms, the soldier, the European engineer, or the technician? During my inspection, I reflected extensively on this issue. I felt that, in addition to my other duties, I should try to understand the fundamental principles of the local worldview and assess the changes that had occurred as a result of contact with another civilization. I had to study the question of Mohammedanism" [8].

For this reason, K.K. Palen paid particular attention to the ethnographic characteristics of the region, the everyday life of the local population, their customs, clothing, and patterns of behavior. He frequently met and conversed with members of the Muslim clergy, documenting these observations in his memoirs. Much of what he observed impressed him, while other aspects surprised him, as he often approached his assessments from a European perspective, not fully recognizing that this represented a different, yet highly developed, civilization [9].

Observing the local inhabitants of the region, K.K. Palen admired the richness and diversity of their attire, but even more so the dignity and nobility of their posture and manners, qualities equally evident in urban mullahs and beks as well as in a young shepherd boy. He was also struck by the respect and reverence shown by the younger generation toward their

elders, visible in every gesture. According to K.K. Palen, such behavior could be achieved only through strict upbringing from an early age. He believed that this function was effectively fulfilled by education in Muslim schools – the maktab.

Having analyzed his observations of the customs and way of life of the local population, which were strictly grounded in religious norms, K.K. Palen candidly admitted: “We Europeans tend to regard Muslim precepts as a set of meaningless rules, but even a brief examination and reflection upon them reveal that each of these rules is based on fundamental Islamic principles and ethics” [10].

In his memoirs, he recalls a meeting with a “remarkable and exceptionally gifted mullah”, who was well educated, fluent in Russian, and had traveled to Paris, Algeria, Morocco, and Constantinople. Although he did not mention the mullah’s name, it was most likely one of the most prominent Jadid reformers, Mahmudkhoja Behbudi, as an account of this meeting was published in the *Turkestanskije Tuzemnyje Vedomosti* [11]. Behbudi established one of the first new-method schools in the Turkestan region, and K.K. Palen was among the first Russian officials to recognize the significance of this educational reform.

K.K. Palen showed great interest in the personality of the renowned commander Timur. He wrote: “The colossal victories of Tamerlane impressed the West. His enemies portrayed him as a cruel and merciless tyrant, while those close to him described him as a genius, an exceptionally talented military leader and a capable ruler. The latter view is closer to the truth, judging by the skill with which he governed his state, as well as by its architecture and cultural monuments. The ruins of the mighty aqueduct that, during his reign, brought water to Samarkand still stand today” [12]. Recalling his visit to Timur’s tomb, Palen wrote: “The tomb of the mighty conqueror, devoid of golden adornments, is as unpretentious and simple as his personal life. ...His image, preserved in transmitted legends, explains why the memory of his great deeds has endured in Central Asia to this day” [13].

K.K. Palen’s memoirs contain a wealth of valuable information about the Turkestan region, including the riches of the Fergana Valley, the unique lands of Semirechye, and the Cossacks who settled there, their occupations, way of life, and challenges among many other topics. Also noteworthy are Senator K.K. Palen’s impressions of his meetings with the Emir of Bukhara and the Khan of Khiva. The visit of Senator K.K. Palen and his entourage was reported in the *Turkestanskije Tuzemnyje Vedomosti*. In Khiva, he stayed for only one day, which was likewise described in the same newspaper.

The final stage of the senator’s journey through the region was the Semirechye Province. K.K. Palen wrote about it in his memoirs: “The Russians call this province the “Land of Seven Rivers”, but it could just as well be called the “Land of Milk and Honey”, for it is generously endowed by nature. The country is a true El Dorado”. In Semirechye, agriculture, animal husbandry, beekeeping, and horticulture were highly developed. However, it was precisely in this prosperous region that Senator K.K. Palen encountered serious problems resulting from the resettlement policy of the tsarist government. “As long as migration to the region”, he wrote in his memoirs, “remained a sporadic phenomenon not directed from Saint Petersburg, everything proceeded well. The settlers rented land from the Kyrgyz, cultivated it, and adapted to local customs and agricultural conditions. ...They built their villages, mastered local irrigation techniques, and maintained friendly relations with the native population, to whom they regularly paid annual rent for the land”.

These settlers constituted the first wave of uncontrolled migration and contributed to the strengthening of friendly relations with the local population. However, the subsequent

colonization of the region under the leadership of the Resettlement Administration led to the emergence of a new authority that was entirely independent of the governor-general, as well as regional and district administrations. This new authority began to settle the region according to fundamentally different principles, which violated the land ownership rights of the local population. The new settlers began to seize land, driving its former owners away. K.K. Palen noted that he received a steady stream of complaints from the Kyrgyz living in the Semirechye region regarding the actions of the Resettlement Administration, which was carrying out colonization there. "I listened to heartbreaking accounts", Palen wrote, "of the suffering of these unfortunate people who had been driven from their homes. They simply could not understand how the officials of the Russian Tsar could deprive them of land that they had brought to life through irrigation" [14]. Such colonization, which continued for 15 years, so severely strained relations between Russian settlers and the local population that, when Senator K.K. Palen traveled through the region, he formed the impression that "an open uprising was not far off, restrained only by fear of soldiers' bayonets" [15]. This deterioration in relations between Russian settlers and the local population, as well as the inappropriate conduct of the newcomers, deeply concerned the senator. He addressed all these issues in great detail in a 430-page special volume of his report titled *The Resettlement Question*.

The facts presented in this work, drawn from the memoirs of Senator K.K. Palen, outline only the most significant issues and questions. At the same time, these memoirs contain a wealth of additional facts and details, many of which remain little known to contemporary researchers, concerning the history of the Turkestan region in the early twentieth century.

4. Conclusion

Overall, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the political and socio-economic situation of the region was undergoing constant change following its conquest by the Russian Empire. The empire's interest in reforming the administrative system of governance in the Turkestan region was reflected in efforts to transfer its administration from the jurisdiction of the Ministry of War to that of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The implementation of this strategic objective required changes to the regulatory framework of governance, particularly the development and adoption of a new statute for the administration of the region. It was precisely this circumstance that served as the primary reason for organizing the senatorial inspection led by Senator K.K. Palen. At the same time, there was an ongoing search for the most suitable and, above all, an "effective system of governance" for these newly acquired lands, rich in natural resources, which given their remote and peripheral position would ensure their maximum exploitation in the interests of the metropolis.

The senatorial inspection led by K.K. Palen was another stage in this process. It was intended to provide the government with materials to address key questions: how to "modernize" the system of colonial administration in the Turkestan region in accordance with the changing political and economic realities of the early twentieth century, and what measures were required to implement the overarching goal of the tsarist government, to create a new "Russian Turkestan" in this resource-rich periphery of the empire by colonizing it with "reliable Russian settlers". It also aimed to determine whether the administration of the region should be transferred from the Ministry of War to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This explains both the appointment of the highly experienced administrator and economic manager, Senator Count K.K. Palen, to conduct the inspection in Turkestan, and the extensive scope of his survey of the region.

The sources for studying Senator K.K. Palen's inspection, its role and significance in the process of "improving" the administrative system of governance in the Turkestan region, and in addressing the question of whether the region should be subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the Ministry of War, include the 20-volume reports on the results of the inspection, published in 1910–1911 in Saint Petersburg, as well as the senator's memoirs, *Mission to Turkestan, 1908–1909*, published in 1964 in London in English. Both sources provide contemporary researchers with a wealth of information on the history of the Turkestan region during the colonial period.

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