ABSTRACT

of the dissertation by **Ainura Talgatovna Suinova** entitled **"Diplomatic Intelligence Missions of the Russian and British Empires in Central Asia in the Last Quarter of the Eighteenth Century to 60s years of the XIX century: the experience of comparative research"**, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the educational program 8D02206 – History.

General Characteristics of the Dissertation Research

The dissertation is devoted to a comparative analysis of the diplomatic intelligence missions of the Russian and British Empires in Central Asia from the last quarter of the eighteenth century to the 1860s. The study examines the aims, methods, and mechanisms of these missions, the processes of information gathering, and the role of intermediaries in the production of imperial knowledge about the region. The research is based on Russian and British archival materials and employs the approaches of comparative, trans-imperial, and new imperial history.

Relevance of the Research Topic

The relevance of the topic is determined by its scholarly, methodological, and socio-historical significance. In the nineteenth century, Central Asia was a space where the interests of the Russian and British Empires intersected, and the study of diplomatic intelligence missions makes it possible to understand the mechanisms through which imperial knowledge and foreign policy strategies were formed in the region. The concept of the "Great Game" continues to influence contemporary discussions on geopolitics, intelligence, and international relations, which makes the study especially relevant for the countries of Central Asia. The topic also possesses significant methodological potential, since the comparative analysis of Russian and British intelligence practices allows for the identification of common patterns in imperial knowledge production and creates a dialogue between Russian, Soviet, and Western historiographical traditions. For Kazakhstani historiography, the research is of particular importance because it examines Kazakh intermediaries, translators, and informants not as secondary actors, but as an important part of imperial information processes. Thus, the relevance of the dissertation is defined by the scholarly novelty of the comparative approach, the significance of the concept of imperial knowledge production, and the need to reinterpret the "Great Game" not only as a geopolitical but also as an informational process.

Object and Subject of the Research

The object of the research is the diplomatic intelligence missions of the Russian and British Empires to Central Asia during the last quarter of the eighteenth century to the 1860s.

Aim and Objectives of the Research

The aim of the dissertation is to conduct a comparative analysis of the diplomatic intelligence missions of the Russian and British Empires in Central Asia during the last quarter of the eighteenth century to the 1860s as two interconnected systems of imperial knowledge production about the region.

The objectives of the research are:

1. To define the content of the concepts “diplomatic mission,” “intelligence mission,” and their hybrid relationship in relation to the period under consideration; to conceptualize the notions of “Central Asia” and “strategy” in the context of nineteenth-century imperial practices.

2. To reconstruct the institutional structure of Russian diplomatic intelligence missions: to characterize the role of the Orenburg Border Commission as the central body for the production of knowledge about the region, and to describe the mechanisms of mission preparation and the personnel system.

3. To analyze the system of forming networks of informants and observers on the Russian side: to identify the typology of “knowledgeable people,” the mechanisms of their recruitment and incorporation, and the role of trade networks as an intelligence infrastructure.

4. To reconstruct the organization of British missions within the system of the East India Company: to characterize the Political and Secret Department, to describe the three directions of missions (Bukharan, Khivan, and Kokand), and the system of instruction.

5. To analyze the informational practices of British missions: to reconstruct agent networks, methods of psychological influence, counterintelligence activities, and mechanisms of administrative information processing.

6. To conduct a systematic comparative analysis of the two systems by comparing institutional mechanisms, mission typologies, personnel profiles, types of “knowledgeable people,” informational practices, and models of the double circulation of knowledge.

7. To assess the role of local actors — Kazakh, Afghan, and Bukharan — as independent subjects who shaped the practices of both imperial systems through resistance, manipulation, and situational cooperation.

Methodology and Research Methods

The methodological foundation of the dissertation is based on four interrelated approaches.

The study employs the approach of new imperial history, characterized by the rejection of teleology, attention to the agency of governed peoples, and recognition of the hybridity of imperial practices. Within the framework of this research, Russian and British missions are examined not as elements of a predetermined conquest, but as practices whose outcomes were shaped, among other factors, by the strategies of local intermediaries.

The concept of colonial knowledge production (M. Foucault, B. Cohn, C. A. Bayly) serves as another methodological basis of the study. Missions are considered mechanisms for the production of knowledge about the region, or “investigative modalities,” within which diplomatic, intelligence, and scientific functions were structurally inseparable. Bayly’s concept of “knowledgeable people” constitutes the analytical core for the study of informant networks within both imperial systems.

The transimperial approach (J. Osterhammel; Piancola/Sartori) allows Russian and British practices to be analyzed not as parallel histories, but as mutually conditioned elements of a single transnational process: agents of one empire

monitored agents of the other, while local actors used the presence of both powers for their own purposes.

The comparative-historical method is applied on the basis of functional analogy. Both systems addressed the same structural task — the production of knowledge about Central Asia as a prerequisite for political control over the region. It is precisely this functional analogy, rather than formal institutional similarity, that constitutes the basis for comparison.

The method of critical reading of sources (Sartori) is employed in working with colonial archives. Sources are interpreted not only as evidence of historical facts, but also as acts of producing a particular version of reality, bearing traces of a "discourse of hostility" and administrative bias.

Scientific Novelty of the Research

The scientific novelty of the dissertation is reflected in the following results:

For the first time, diplomatic and intelligence missions of the late eighteenth century to the 1860s are systematically examined as instruments of imperial presence in the region and as independent mechanisms for the production of knowledge about Central Asia, rather than merely as diplomatic events or military preconditions for conquest.

Through comparative analysis, the study identifies the transimperial mechanism underlying the formation of Russian and British practices in Central Asia, including synchronous episodes of direct confrontation between the two systems, such as the Kabul confrontation (1837–1838) and parallel actions concerning the Khivan question (1839–1840).

For the first time, archival documents from the India Office Records of the British Library have been introduced into the scholarly circulation of domestic historiography.

A fundamentally important innovation is the introduction into scholarly circulation of testimonies by liberated Russian captives from the Central Asian khanates as an independent category of intelligence sources.

For the first time, the phenomenon of the double circulation of knowledge — the parallel production of secret and public flows of information — is analyzed as a system-forming practice common to both imperial systems.

The study identifies the fundamental difference between the institutional logics of the two systems: the Russian system (the Orenburg Border Commission) and the British system (the Political and Secret Department of the East India Company), while also revealing the transimperial mechanism of the mutual formation of their practices.

The dissertation establishes the fundamental differences between the Russian and British systems of mediation and personnel training.

Scientific and Practical Significance of the Research

The scientific significance of the dissertation lies in the reconstruction of the "knowledgeable people" system of the Orenburg Frontier Commission based on newly introduced archival materials, the first comparative analysis of Russian and British intelligence practices, and the restoration of the role of Kazakh intermediaries in imperial information processes. The practical significance of the study consists in

the possibility of using its results in courses on the history of Central Asia, the history of empires, and the history of intelligence and diplomacy of the nineteenth century.

Main Provisions Submitted for Defense

1. Diplomatic and intelligence missions of the Russian and British Empires in Central Asia during the first half of the nineteenth century did not constitute two separate historical phenomena, but rather represented two functional aspects of a single phenomenon — a hybrid mechanism of imperial knowledge production about the region. The distinction between "diplomatic" and "intelligence" missions in relation to this period is a retrospective historiographical construct, since all official missions structurally combined negotiating, intelligence-gathering, cartographic, and agent-based functions simultaneously.

2. Russian and British intelligence systems pursued the same structural task — the production of knowledge about Central Asia as a condition for political control — while employing functionally analogous instruments within fundamentally different institutional logics. The Russian system (the Orenburg Border Commission) relied on a three-level centralized hierarchy aimed at the gradual administrative incorporation of space. The British system (the Political and Secret Department of the East India Company) relied on a four-level decentralized structure designed to manage a buffer zone beyond the limits of direct sovereignty.

3. Both systems organized the production of knowledge through "knowledgeable people," that is, local intermediaries possessing the competencies necessary to operate within the region. The fundamental difference lay in the nature of this competence. Russian "knowledgeable people" (Kazakh aristocrats, Tatar mullahs, and translators) possessed an organic dual identity, simultaneously belonging to both imperial and local systems. British intermediaries (orientalist officers of the East India Company), by contrast, possessed predominantly acquired competence. This distinction determined the fundamentally different limits of informational penetration available to each system.

4. The Neplyuev Cadet Corps in Orenburg functioned as a deliberately designed institution for producing "knowledgeable people" with dual competence and was functionally analogous to Fort William College in Calcutta on the British side. A comparison of the two institutions reveals a fundamental difference: the Cadet Corps produced bilingual intermediaries with an organic dual identity, whereas the College trained orientalists possessing acquired knowledge of a foreign cultural space.

5. Both systems simultaneously produced secret knowledge (archival dispatches and intelligence reports) and public knowledge (memoirs, academic publications, and parliamentary reports). The mechanism through which secret information was transformed into public knowledge — such as the "omitted" markings in Burnes's dispatches or the "secret" classification on Osmolovsky's memoranda — represented a structural manifestation of the unified phenomenon of the double circulation of knowledge, which performed independent political functions by legitimizing imperial presence before both domestic and international audiences.

6. The “Great Game” as a historical phenomenon was, above all, an information war — a system of the mutual production, interception, and discrediting of knowledge about the region — rather than merely a geopolitical, military-political, and diplomatic rivalry. Synchronous episodes such as the confrontation between Burnes and Vitkevich in Kabul (1837–1838), as well as Perovsky’s Khivan expedition and the missions of Abbott and Shakespeare (1839–1840), demonstrate that the practices of each power were formed through reactions to the practices of the other. This was not a parallel movement, but a mutually conditioned development of two systems within a single transnational space.

7. Kazakh, Afghan, and Bukharan actors were not passive objects of Russian and British manipulation, but active subjects who consistently used imperial rivalry in their own interests. Kazakh khans and intermediaries, Dost Mohammad Khan, and Ranjit Singh employed similar balancing strategies between competing powers, extracting resources and status from their intermediary positions. It was precisely this subjectivity of local actors that determined the real limits of informational control exercised by both imperial systems over the region.

8. The system of knowledge production about Central Asia was structurally dependent upon “knowledgeable people” while simultaneously underestimating their agency — a phenomenon described by C. A. Bayly as the “cognitive bias” of imperial administrators. Two of the greatest military failures of the period — the catastrophe of Perovsky’s Khivan campaign (1839) and the disaster of the First Anglo-Afghan War (1842) — serve as historical confirmation of this structural contradiction. In both cases, the warnings of “knowledgeable people” were ignored, leading to catastrophic consequences.

9. Trade networks linking Orenburg and Calcutta with Central Asian markets constituted a permanent intelligence infrastructure that functioned independently of periodic official and covert missions. Merchant-informants on both sides, such as Garif Atagaliev and Alimbay Murzabayev on the Russian side, and Surwar Khan Lohani together with Bukharan merchants in Kashmir on the British side, formed a unified transnational trade-intelligence space in which commercial and intelligence functions were structurally inseparable.

10. A comparative analysis of the two systems makes it possible to propose a new conceptualization of their relationship: Russian and British intelligence systems were optimally adapted to fundamentally different strategic objectives. The Russian system was oriented toward the administrative incorporation of territory through gradual inclusion into the empire, whereas the British system was designed to manage a buffer zone through diplomacy and intelligence beyond the limits of direct sovereignty. Whenever each system attempted to apply the methods of the other — Russia using direct diplomacy without administrative resources, and Britain relying on direct military presence — both experienced systemic failure. This structural observation constitutes one of the principal conclusions of the present comparative study.