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Choi Han-Woo**

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The 19th Century Europeans' Perceptions of Central Asia (to the question on terms «colonization» and «westernization»)

Fok I.D.

Institute of History, Uzbek Academy of Sciences

To reflect on the progress of humanity one can point at the West-East relations as they have changed for two last centuries. The epoch of colonization had been left behind. More and more Eastern nations try to integrate elements of the Western-style economy and democracy to obtain success in developing.

Uzbekistan is not an exception. After more than hundred years under the Russian tsarist and then Soviet rule she gained independence in 1991. A new own way of developing had been proclaimed. In the republic appealing to the recreation of the national traditions, history, culture as they were in the precolonial time is as frequent as to the Western liberal democracy and market-economy. The combination of rather conflicting things is significant. Firstly, because of attempts to go backward and forward at the same time; secondly, because westernizing is understood as a quite new wave of progress, free from cultural, national traits.

Among the factors influencing such attitude, one is generally accepted conceptions of Central Asia history of the 19-20th centuries.

Russian colonization, movements of resistance, political, economical and social effect of the Russian rule make the period of the second half of the 19th century a crucial one and most studied by national and foreign historians. In the Soviet historiography the Russian conquest was interpreted as a free will of the Central Asia people to put themselves under the rule of the more developed and progressive power. In the Western school the conception concentrates on the cruelty of the Russian conquest, on damage done to traditional, economical and social

institutions. The recent Uzbek historiography considers the Russian colonization as the greatest evil, which blocked the natural development of the Uzbek nation; and the main issue in the latest works is national movements of resistance to the Russian rule.

In these conceptions the whole situation, events and facts are interpreted in their local sense for they concerned Uzbekistan and Russia. Also, the destroying effect of the intervention of a different culture is stressed either its results are interpreted positively or negatively. Having been formed in the 19th century, these conceptions reflect politic-social ideas and theories of the time. Let us look at the second half of the 19th century history of Central Asia as it was viewed by its Western contemporaries, in our case by British ones. It will be interesting if to remember that England was in the vanguard of the development and progress, «the august mother of self-governing nations, the chosen home of freedom», as they said according to the epoch's style¹.

Till the 1860^s legends about impossibility for Europeans to get into Central Asia legally and get out of it went over the Western world. Rare travellers told of Asiatics' hostility to everything and everybody of the West. In this respect the famous book of A.Vambery «Travels in Central Asia» published on the eve of the conquest in 1864 had confirmed Europeans in that opinion.

Russia had broken open the region. As «The Quarterly Review» wrote, «We admit the benefit to the world of her displacement of the barbarous Uzbek tyrannies — and the opening of the Central Asia to the research»². Pressmen, travellers (mostly servicemen) rushed into the region. First of all, they were to get any information of the Russian advance. And there we find out the understanding of Central Asia as it came in the Modern history period, it is that Central Asia is regions which intervene between two empires the Russian and the British-Indian³. The rivalry between two powers, so-called «Great Game», was studied in details in the 20th but in these works as in those of

¹ Scrine F.H., Ross E.D. The Heart of Asia. – London, 1899, p. 415.

² The Quarterly Review - 1873. № 268, p. 549.

³ The Quarterly Review -1866. № 240, p. 462.

the 19th the drama of the loss of independence and the object of the rivalry are lost.

Besides that, there was curiosity of the region, its people, their life and customs. An imaginary picture of the ancient and mysterious land faded into the reality. The time of greatness and prosperity was in the past. Central Asia «has for ages been going from good to bad, alike physically and in the condition of its people»⁴. Its agricultural, commercial, mineral and other resources were all at their lowest ebb⁵. Articles in journals, traveler's narratives, translations from Russian gave a picture of places where life in its social and cultural manifestations was strange and different from life in countries of the Christian West. The «East – West» opposition read as «Backwardness - Progress» opposition. One of the travellers wrote, «The nature and the religion alike of most of these tribes and countries are adverse to progress and civilization — which is so characteristic of Eastern races»⁶.

Besides clear seen superficial knowledge of Central Asia, certain culture prejudices of this opinion and many similar ones there was a rational core. The lack of a modern education system, of technical and scientific base, the Western-style political and law systems shaped the state in which Central Asia had been by the 19th century. These moments were frequently discussed by English authors. For them and their readers the necessity to civilize (or westernize) Central Asia people was evident. The task didn't contradict the colonial policy. Instead, it was looked at as an aim of colonisation. At the same time the English considered that last from a very practical point of view. They wondered what Russia hoped to take from a land where ruins were far more numerous than the living towns⁷. There was severe criticism about Russian military operations, methods of administrating but not of colonization. In England and in other Western countries as well there was a general belief that colonizers as men of the European and liberal ideas were on a higher plane than Asiatics so notwithstanding their many shortcomings the Russian lifted

⁴ The Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazin. 1880. № 778, p. 205.

⁵ D.Ch.Boulger. England and Russia in Central Asia. - London, 1879, p. 69

⁶ V.Baker. Clouds in the East. – London. 1876, p. 330

⁷ The Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazin. 1880. № 778, p. 206.

the people of Central Asia to better manners, better modes of thought and life. Arminius Vambery perhaps had given the most clear idea of what colonization was. «Where in the world is a man or a nation which enters on a perilous undertaking without the hope of, what I call, an honourable benefit for its services? Were the Greeks and Romans better in this regard? Were they not remunerated with the riches of Europe and of Asia for their civilizing work?»⁸. This rather rhetorical question sounds actual. Should we see the certain natural development of humanity in colonization and agree with those who think that what historians call «colonization» existed long before the 19th century, that our civilization was going forward through conquests, and the history of progress is in fact the history of conquests?⁹ If so, and readiness of a number of the Eastern states to adopt the Western advice and recommendations is a serious argument for it, then the struggle against Russian colonizers looks ambiguous or even meaningless from this point of view.

We find little information about rebellions against the conquerors. The authors usually considered the rebellions as a religious war against everything that contradicted Islam. The clergy, Muslim fanatics were the first enemies to changes brought in by the Russian colonization.

Also, there is another aspect shows how bearers of the imperial mentality are prone to self-deception. Sir Henry Rawlinson wrote that the Central Asian states having a foreboding of the threat from Russia looked for help of England seeing in her the natural protector of Muslims¹⁰. It is a fact that the Indian Muslims looked for the Russian support of their own struggle for freedom because they had heard of how well off the Russian Muslims were.

It is obvious that by the 19th century Central Asia Muslims as Muslims of other countries had got into a scrape of the world history

⁸ A. Vambery. His life and adventures written by himself. - London, 1884, p. 366.

⁹ Aktualnye problemi istorii kolonializma. Novaya i noveyshaya istoriya. 1989, № 4, s. 77; A. Khalid in his work «The politics of Muslim cultural reform: Jeditism in Central Asia» (1998) put the sign of equality between «Russification» and «Westernization» (p. 13).

¹⁰ Sir Henry Rawlinson. England and Russia in the East. – London, 1875, p. 188.

movement. British records seem to have caught the very moment when possibility of the independent way to exist was lost by Central Asia people and their resistance to the Western influence was broken.

However the idea of the English perceptions of Central Asia in the period of the Russian colonization won't be exhaustive unless to say about the different and unpopular at that time attitude to the East - West problem: in 1875 Sir Rutherford Alcock analysing the situation in Central Asia wrote, «Within the last two centuries all aggression and advance has come from the West — Nor need I refer to the influence of Christianity in arrest of action. When have these ever prevailed to prevent spoliation or wars? Have any considerations either of morality as to the rights of property in territory, or of Christianity or Canons of international law, prevented invasion?»¹¹ And let us be honest, they aren't easy questions to answer even today.

In the 20th century the interpretation of colonization as progress and developing disappeared from English works on the Central Asia history. New modes of thinking allowed to appreciate social and cultural life of Asiatics without comparing to that of the Western nations. It resulted in that a problem of reforming a traditional society in the historical context stopped to be the object to study. But now this problem asks for historians' attention as never before.

¹¹ R.Alcock. The inheritance of the Great Mogul. - The fortnightly Review. 1875. August, p. 166