

Empires' Keif, or Opium Trade on the Tea Route in the Era of Late Empires*

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This paper offers an analysis of the process by which new borders appeared in Inner Asia during the late imperial period. The research focuses on the borders of Russia, Qing, and Mongolia at the time of the collapse of the Qing Empire and political crisis in Russia, which led to its demise in 1917. The author aims to reveal the influence of these processes on the region referring to transborder smuggling via the transformation of the control and power of central governments. In the author's opinion, two key factors defined the increase in opium smuggling at the Russo-Mongolian border in 1900–1917. First, political destabilization on the outskirts of the Qing Empire. Second, Cossack regiments were sent from the border to Europe to take part in World War I, thus border control was greatly reduced. The research for this study is based upon the materials of the Russian Imperial customs in the town of Kyakhta, the long-time center of Russo-Chinese trade. Based on archival data, one can trace the volumes and routes of opium smuggling from Iran to Mongolia. The area under consideration is well researched as a cross-border smuggling point; however, the problem of the illicit opium trade is still insufficiently analyzed. This is due to both political obstacles and access to sources. This article is the first attempt at a systematic study of opium trafficking through Kyakhta. The destination of the routes was the town of Maimaicheng, located near Kyakhta and inhabited by Chinese merchants. Opium was also bought by the *honghuzi* – armed robbers operating near the border. However, when the Civil War broke out in Russia (1917–1922), and the Far Eastern Republic was established, opium supply via the Trans-Siberian Railway declined as this route was no longer safe. Therefore, the notion of regional order and disorder is an important category for this research. This framework offers a way of better understanding Trans-Eurasian relations in the twentieth century.

Keywords: Inner Asia, customs, smuggling, opium, frontier, empire

Представлен анализ процесса формирования новых границ во Внутренней Азии в позднеимперский период. В центре внимания автора – границы России, Цин и этнической Монголии. Это было время распада

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империи Цин и политического кризиса в Российской империи, приведшего к событиям 1917 г. Автор ставит задачу изучения взаимовлияния этих процессов и в качестве примера исследует приграничную контрабанду через призму трансформации форм контроля и власти. Увеличение опиумной контрабанды на российско-монгольском участке границы в начале XX в. было связано как с политической дестабилизацией на окраинах бывшей империи Цин, так и со снижением контроля со стороны России в связи с массовой переброской в Европу на фронты Первой мировой войны пограничных казачьих полков. Исследование опирается на материалы таможни Российской империи в Кяхте – центре российско-китайской торговли. Архивные данные позволяют проследить объемы и траектории опиумной контрабанды от границ Ирана до Монголии. Статья является первой попыткой системного изучения опиумного трафика через Кяхту. Итоговым пунктом доставки наркотиков на этом участке границы был город-спутник Кяхты Маймачен, населенный китайскими торговцами. Наряду с ними потребителями опиума были трансграничные банды хунхузов. Однако после начала Гражданской войны в России 1917–1922 гг. и создания Дальневосточной Республики крупные поставки опиума через Транссибирскую магистраль прекратились в силу небезопасности этого пути, поэтому важными категориями данного исследования стали понятия регионального порядка и беспорядка. Они во многом позволяют объяснить пограничные отношения в регионе в XX в.

Ключевые слова: Внутренняя Азия, таможня, контрабанда, опиум, фронт, империя

This study examines the period when imperial borders in Inner Asia were broken and smuggling flourished. The geographical framework of the study is limited to the key trading hubs of the Tea Route – the oldest channel of Russian-Qing trade [Старцев; Лиштованный]. Historical experience has demonstrated that the import of tea was closely linked to opium smuggling [Bard]. The main hypothesis of the present research is that, in the late imperial period, Russia and China did a poor job of combating opium smuggling, despite their enormous efforts. The paper assumes that such low efficiency was associated with the crisis of imperial governance structures at the beginning of the twentieth century and with the inability of empires to quickly adapt to the rapidly changing reality in this period.

Chronologically, the study covers the beginning of the twentieth century, although the article also provides an overview of changes in the laws of the nineteenth century prohibiting the opium trade on the Tea Route. The focus is on the period of late empires, struggling to cope with the growing number of illegal operations, not only with the transit of opium [Левитов], but also gold, weapons, and alcohol. After the Xinhai Revolution in 1911, a new geopolitical configuration began to take shape in Inner Asia. The appearance of Mongolian autonomy on the map influenced the

nature of trade relations on the Tea Route, which ceased to directly link the economies of the two continental empires.

Trading networks, created during the nineteenth century, as well as the emerging specialization of certain regions in cultivating opium poppy, testify to the existence of an economic system focused on excess profits [see also: Pianciola]. The period under study is also the era of “new speeds” [Schivelbusch, p. 33–44]: the development of railways and river shipping lines. The first steamships navigated the Selenga River in 1860, but the Kyakhta Steamship Partnership transport company appeared only in 1887, and, by 1894, had 11 steamships and 18 barges at its disposal. Its main routes were freight routes, ensuring the transportation of goods from Kyakhta to Irkutsk customs and back. Of the 1 million poods of tea that passed through Irkutsk customs in 1891, up to 400,000 poods were delivered by steamships along the Selenga [Богословский, с. 87].

This had a direct impact on the nature of trading operations. Local entrepreneurs actively supported the Trans-Mongolian Railway project. It can be said that a new infrastructure for transcontinental traffic of both legal and illegal goods was being formed. The beginning of the twentieth century in Inner Asia is also associated with the development of banks and mining enterprises, actively operating not only in Russia but also in Mongolia [Плеханова, Ширапов]. In 1907, the gold-mining shafts of the Russian corporation “Mongolor” were opened in the territory of Outer Mongolia, using the labor of Chinese workers [Фурман, с. 141]. All these processes contributed to the expansion of the opium market. This is confirmed by the archival materials studied by the author, which directly indicate two main points of trade: the Chinese commercial suburb of Maimacheng and the gold mines.

In Soviet historical science, a systematic study of illegal opium trade was initiated by B. P. Gurevich [Гуревич]. His 1963 article is still relevant today since it characterizes Russian policy towards the opium trade during the Anglo-Chinese War. Gurevich was among the first to point out that Russian imperial policy consistently opposed the opium trade. Moreover, Emperor Nicholas I, as well as Minister of Finance E. F. Kankrin, opposed the business at the legislative level. Both wholesale supplies and small retail sales were strictly banned. Gurevich pointed out the problem area where Tsarist Russia was unreasonably assigned responsibility for the opium trade [Там же].

G. N. Peskova delved deeper into the issue in her 1982 work on the foreign opium trade in China, paying much attention to discussions with Chinese historians who detailed the facts of opium supplies from Russia. Based on archival documents, G. N. Peskova consistently substantiates the thesis that the Russian Empire opposed the opium trade, while the United States and Great Britain controlled it almost completely [Пескова]. However, Soviet works on the subject offer weak argumentation, being based on the historical materialism methodology and showing a purely polemical nature. The scale of opium supplies from Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries cannot be refuted, but these were made possible by the weakness of imperial power in Siberia. In addition,

by the end of the nineteenth century, the Russian Empire entered an era of systemic crisis of governance, which ended with the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. Therefore, facts of local corruption were equally widespread in both the Qing and Russia. The opium trade in the Russian Empire was completely criminalized, while being fully legal in England, for instance. Certain initiatives to legalize the sale of opium to China, put forward during the reign of Nicholas II, did not receive government support, and the ban remained in force [Пескова].

Among more recent scholarship, the key work on the opium trade is the article by T. N. Sorokina, published in 2014 [Sorokina]. It describes the political and economic aspects of the trade in opium and counterfeit alcohol based on materials from the Far East (Ussuri region). In this context, it is interesting that against the background of large-scale research interest in the opium trade for this period in the Far East, there are no such works on the Tea Route. The study of cross-border trade in Inner Asia in the late imperial period is the subject of the works by L. V. Kalmina and A. M. Plekhanova, who analyzed the role of cities in the system of trade relations with Mongolia and China [Кальмина, Плеханова]. The work by L. V. Kuras is dedicated to smuggling on the border with Mongolia [Курас].

The works by V. V. Sinichenko should be given attention among modern studies of the fight against opium smuggling, as his research provides a detailed description of government policy in this respect. Using materials from the Amur section of the Russian-Qing border, Sinichenko revealed the features of the illegal opium trade in the Far East, which differed from the trade in Transbaikalia [Синиченко].

The sourcebase of the presented research can be divided into two large blocks. The first block is the published materials of Russian military expeditions at the beginning of the twentieth century: V. Popov's book, dated 1911, describing the development of the border and the system of its protection in the Russian-Mongolian sector in the context of relations between Russia and the Qing Empire [Попов], and the work of Colonel Poltavtsev in 1913 [Полтавцев], in which he analyzed in sufficient detail the conditions for the development of border relations in the post-Qing period of emerging Mongolian autonomy. These two books make it possible to trace the dynamics of the development of cross-border relations and their impact on trade relations. The reports on trade operations by the manager of the Mongolian branches of the Russian-Chinese Bank, S. F. Stepanov, systematically published in the Russian press, were also examined by the author [Свечников].

In addition, the published documents of the office work of the Russian Empire were consulted, including The Complete Collection of Laws of the Russian Empire; The Collection of Consular Reports of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire; The Special Journal of the Council of Ministers.

The second block of the sources is made up of documents from the State Archives of the Republic of Buryatia, fund 102 of the Kyakhta customs. This includes protocols of the detention and seizure of contraband goods (khanshin and opium), from which the volume of seizures can be judged.

Today, it is the main regional archival fund containing materials on the development of the Kyakhta trade in the late imperial period.

Continental empires and the fight against the opium trade

The first documented mentions of a ban on the opium trade from Russia to China date back to 12 April 1841. Document 14450 bears the name of the personal decree of Emperor Nicholas I “On the Non-Entry of Opium to Chinese Lands” and was published on 28 April 1841 [Самойлов, с. 126]. The text of the decree contains references to the decree of the Qing Emperor Daoguang (Dàoguāng Dì), dated 1840:

Even upon receipt of the news regarding the issuance of the law by the Chinese government prohibiting the import of opium into this state, which has long existed between Russia and the Chinese Empire, in the interests of mutual border relations and mutual trade benefits, according to Our will, it was prescribed for the authorities to strictly observe the non-entry of opium into the Chinese lands: but since this prohibition was not made public for general information, and wishing that it be known throughout the state, with due supervision of everyone, we command the Governing Senate to make the proper order for execution immediately [ПСЗ-2, т. 16, отд. 1, 1841, с. 303]¹.

This ban coincided with the outbreak of the First Opium War of 1840–1842. At the same time, after the end of the Turkish-Egyptian war, relations between Russia and the British Empire entered a phase of confrontation. In the author’s opinion, the ban on the supply of opium made it possible to preserve the tea trade, which was key for Russia, and to support the Qing empire, which entered war with Great Britain and France. Bans on the opium trade were also associated with fears of its spread in Russia’s Asian possessions. The situation in neighboring China could be repeated, where the opium trade led to a massive outflow of gold and silver.

Considering the opium trade as a tool to weaken the Qing empire, which stood in the way of the British advance to the Asian possessions of Russia, Nicholas I continued the policy of prohibitions. Thus, on 20 January 1844, the Supreme Command was sent to the Governing Senate, “On prohibiting the opium trade to the Chinese and bringing those convicted of such a trade to a military court”. The Senate meeting on this issue was initiated by the report of the Troitskosavsky border commander, which revealed that the Chinese had identified several opium smokers near the border in Maimacheng. During the investigation, they stated that opium was obtained from Russia. Following the meeting of the Senate, it was decided to execute punishments through military courts in such situations, and Vice-Chancellor Count Nesselrode was supposed to inform the governors of Eastern and Western Siberia regarding this matter. The Senate decision was sent to three ministries: the Military Department, the Ministry of the Internal Affairs, and the Ministry of Finance

¹ Hereinafter, the texts of the documents cited have been translated by the author of the article.

[ПСЗ-2, т. 19, отд. 1, 1844, с. 45]. In 1845, an inspection was appointed to investigate illegal trade in Kyakhta.

During this historical period, almost all Russian-Chinese trade was concentrated on this section of the Tea Route. The key point of this trade route was the Troitskosavskaya customs (Kyakhta customs), next to which the Chinese enclave, Maimacheng, was actively developing [Намчаева]. Until 1854, the tea trade was facilitated through barter; tea was exchanged for textiles and fur. It was only in 1854 that monetized trade became compulsory. It was during the heyday of bartering that the idea of exchanging tea for opium, which was supplied from Persia, came about. Only after the annexation of the Amur region (in 1860) would Russia have its own territories near the border with China with conditions favorable for cultivating opium poppy. In the 1840s, Kyakhta was the largest transit point of the empire, through which a huge amount of legal and illegal goods passed. Under these conditions, the inspection appointed by the decision of the Senate was able to establish the volume of smuggling. However, the investigation was interrupted by a fire on 27 April 1845 in Troitskosavsk. It was recorded in the journal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs for 1845:

Within three hours, the best part of the city burned out: more than a hundred private houses, public places: the Troitskosavsk Border Office, City Police, Kyakhta Town Hall, Spiritual Board, and in addition: the Guardhouse, Parish School, Government-subsidized housing for the Border Guard, as well as a merchant stockpile with goods [Журнал Министерства внутренних дел, с. 119–120].

From 1844, Russian customs in Kyakhta failed to document almost any subjects of the Russian Empire with opium. The threat of a military court seemingly led to the Chinese monopolizing the transportation of opium. Punishment for the subjects of the Qing Empire in Russia was limited to the drawing up a protocol, confiscation of the opium, and extradition to their homeland. The opium trade through Kyakhta undoubtedly continued, as the decline of the tea trade increasingly reoriented Russian businessmen to more lucrative activities. At the same time, it must be said that the British East India Company was also involved in the opium trade under the guise of buying tea. However, in the middle of the nineteenth century, Russian traders could not compete on equal terms with British traders in the opium trade. Only at the beginning of the twentieth century would opium plantations in Iran be equal in terms of production with the British plantations in Bengal [Rowntree, p. 191; Чиркин, с. 482–483].

The next stage in the fight against drug trafficking falls on April 1862 [ПСЗ-2, т. 37, отд. 1, 1862], during the reign of Alexander II, who signed an order to the Senate to oblige the Governor-General of Eastern Siberia to ensure that artillery shells, weapons, gunpowder, and opium were prohibited from crossing the Chinese border. These efforts were made immediately after the annexation of the Amur region and the establishment of a state border along the Amur River in accordance with

the Convention of Peking in 1860. However, this imperial order mainly extended to the territory of the Ussuri region, which was then a huge and almost uncontrollable territory. The Amur region was a territory where opium was grown and sold. From the end of the nineteenth century, the process began of redirecting the export of opium from Russia over the Mongolian border to instead being transported via the local Amur border. Nevertheless, the government of the Russian Empire, working closely with the Qing government, continued to make efforts to end the opium trade. In 1912, Russia signed the International Opium Convention. The convention provided that “the contracting powers should use their best endeavors to control, or to cause to be controlled, all persons manufacturing, importing, selling, distributing, and exporting morphine, cocaine, and their respective salts, as well as the buildings in which these persons carry such an industry or trade” [International Opium Convention].

International trade: tea in exchange for opium?

In this section, the authors will attempt to trace the formation of tea and opium trading networks at the level of the world economy at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Railways and new sea routes that emerged after the opening of the Suez Canal had a negative impact on Russian trade in Chinese tea. However, the trade route through Kyakhta did not stop functioning fully, and the range of goods passing through it was quite wide. Under the influence of the changes taking place in the region, the caravan trade, which was widespread in the eighteenth – nineteenth centuries, changed its format. The laying of the Trans-Siberian Railway through Verkhneudinsk opened new opportunities. At the same time, a river shipping line began to operate, delivering goods along the Selenga River to the Mongolian border. In 1912, court physician, P. A. Badmaev, proposed a project for another trade artery – the Trans-Mongolian Railway [Бадмаев]. It was supposed to ensure uninterrupted trade between China and Russia and support the Tea Route that had begun to decline. Even though the project did not receive support, it is important to note that until the defeat of the Kyakhta Maimacheng during the 1921 revolution in Mongolia, Kyakhta trade was of strategic importance for all its stakeholders.

Transcontinental trade also created conditions for transcontinental smuggling. This is primarily with regards to opium. In the territory of Transbaikal, in contrast to the Amur region or the Ili region [Sorokina], the conditions for opium cultivation are unfavorable, therefore, all opium recorded by customs on the border with Mongolia was imported. The situation was also influenced by the relatively low activity of Hunghuz gangs² in this section of the border [Дацышен]. This is due to the strategic

² Hunghuz gangs (redbeards) were cross-border criminal groups that robbed trade caravans on the northern borders of the Qing Empire. The gangs included Chinese (Han), Mongols, Dungans, and Russians. The Russian military separated land and sea Hunghuz gangs, which pirated in the Sea of Japan. The period of activity of Hunghuz gangs was the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

importance of the Tea Route, where, through the efforts of merchants, an effective cargo security system was established [Купец].

The events that determined the specific developments taking place on the Russian-Mongolian border were reflected in the consular reports on Russia's trade with Persia. During the examined period, according to diplomatic sources, the volume of tea trade with Persia increased. This is especially well traced in the documents of 1906, that is, after the end of the Russo-Japanese War and with a decrease in the amount of military cargo on the Trans-Siberian Railway. The consulate data indicate that "Chinese tea of Russian spillage" is imported into Persia through Baku, Krasnovodsk, Ashkhabad, and Meshed. In 1908, in Persia, two-ruble tea from Russia was sold for four rubles, and it was consumed mainly by the "upper strata of Persia" [Миллер, с. 49–50]. At the same time, the consul highlights that Indian tea was generally not in demand. Serious competition for Russian loose tea was only seen with Javanese tea (German and Dutch packaging). The report notes the expediency of supplying tea from Russia by sea through the port of Odessa [Там же, с. 50]. However, this proposal did not find support.

With the flourishing trade in Chinese tea in Persia, according to diplomatic reports, Russia increased purchases of opium in Persia (in Persian – *terjak*). In a comparative perspective, the following dynamics can be traced: in 1903–1904, 3,856 batman of opium was purchased in Persia, and in 1904–1905 – 76,803 batman (1 Shah batman is equal to 14 Russian pounds) [Введенский, с. 339]. By 1906, the Persian Isfahan had become the international center to produce opium. Thus, the Russian consul in the region wrote in a report:

The poppy culture for the production of opium, which is now flourishing in Isfahan, arose no earlier than forty years ago and immediately acquired outstanding importance, significantly raising the well-being of the rural population. The poppy culture owes its rapid development to the constant and ever-increasing demand for opium, both due to its significant export to India, China, and Japan, and to its unrelenting consumption within the country [Чиркин, с. 482].

According to official documents in the Russian Empire, a significant part of the imported opium went to medical needs, although it was seized in considerable volumes by the Kyakhta customs during attempts to transport it abroad.

The laying of the Trans-Siberian Railway changed the nature of trade with the outskirts of the Qing empire. At the same time, the traditional format of trade in the eighteenth – nineteenth centuries (fur and textiles in exchange for tea) was supplemented in the twentieth century by a new variable in the form of Persian opium. As the profitability of the tea trade declined, the old trading networks became an effective tool for smuggling opium. The volume and frequency of attempts to transport it across the border

increased in proportion to the growth in the intensity of steam-powered traffic on this section of the border [see also: Bello; Peshkov; Urbansky]. All this happened against the background of large-scale political changes that dramatically changed the map of the region due to the decline of old empires and the emergence of new nation-states.

Borders after the Xinhai Revolution: old lines under new conditions

After the Xinhai Revolution and the fall of the Qing dynasty, Mongolia ceased to be the outskirts of the empire and, in 1911, gained de jure autonomy and de facto full independence. At the court of the theocratic ruler of Mongolia, the 8th Bogd Gegen (Bogd Khan) formally retained political dependence on the central government of China. It was also decided at the time that it would not be expedient to change the signs and state symbols for at least two thirds of the border with the Russian Empire.

In 1912, Russia and Mongolia entered into an "Agreement on Friendship", which recognized Mongolia's independence. In one of its points, it was indicated that Chinese troops (including those acting as border guards) had been expelled from the territory of Mongolia [Батсайхан, 2014, с. 38]. The message of the provisional government of autonomous Mongolia to the chiefs of the khoshuns (counties) stated:

At the time of creating the great Mongolian state, all khoshuns must act together to reliably protect the sacred lands of Mongolia from an external enemy, placing troops on all the most important trade routes [Батсайхан, 2018, с. 117].

However, by 1913, Russia and China signed a declaration in which Russia recognized China's limited suzerainty over Mongolia. According to this document, both sides (Russia and China) undertook obligations not to send troops into Mongolian territory [Батсайхан, 2014, с. 56].

In 1915, after the signing of a triple agreement between Russia, Mongolia, and China in Kyakhta, the customs system was changed on the border with Russia (clause 12 of the agreement). In essence, the new system confused the already complex relations between the three states. The consolidated suzerainty of China over Mongolia became the basis for special status of Chinese traders, who received the right to the unlimited import of any goods into the territory [Батсайхан, 2018, с. 261]. On 27 June 1912, the 8th Bogd Gegen officially banned the import, trade, cultivation, and use of opium in Mongolia [Батсайхан, 2010, с. 44]. Attempts were made to limit smuggling, but the weakness of the border guard system made them ineffective.

Thus, during the period of rising autonomy, Mongolia inherited from the Qing Empire the northern section of the border with Russia, enshrined in the Burinsky Treaty and the Treaty of Kyakhta, dated 1727. In the territory of Mongolia, despite the clauses of the 1913 agreement, there were several units of the Verkhneudinsk regiment, as well as Russian

military instructors who trained the Mongolian army. Formally, they all ensured the safety of Russian colonists and concessions, however, they guarded the borders of autonomous Mongolia. On the Russian side, the border was patrolled by Cossack guards, the number of which dropped significantly after the outbreak of World War I. Cossack regiments acted in conjunction with the Separate Border Guard Corps: in each regiment, there was a border representative (major) from a separate border guard corps, who monitored the correctness of border protection and resolved emerging issues with the Mongol guards. However, a continuous guarded border was never formed.

The Russian-Mongolian border at the beginning of the twentieth century was relatively weakly guarded and remained open for smuggling. The historically developed “soft” type of border did not imply a rigid dividing line and provided opportunities for the free movement of people [Свечников]. The border became a resource for residents who mastered a variety of segments of trade, including those that were illegal. The population of the Russian-Mongolian frontier, up until the mid-1930s, had the opportunity to move freely and were able to choose their political loyalty to a particular state [Peshkov].

The opium trade after the fall of the Qing

The materials of the Kyakhta customs indicate an almost industrial scale of Persian opium smuggling. The Chinese were predominantly involved in this activity. This circumstance, in the author’s opinion, is explained by the specifics of informal networks (opium smoking rooms) within the territory of the former Qing empire [Smith], through which the retail market was created. The network of opium-smoking rooms in Mongolia was formed during the Manchu dynasty. The Mongolian researcher, Batsaikhan, describing this process, writes that the first dens for drug use appeared in large settlements such as Da-Khure and Ulyasutai [Барсайхан, 2010, с. 44]. The retail price of opium was 1 spool (4.26 grams) of opium for 1 spool of silver [Потанина, с. 161]. Back in the second half of the nineteenth century, Przhevalsky noted that the habit of smoking opium quickly transferred from the Chinese to the neighboring Mongols, but this vice had not yet spread deep into Mongolia [Пржевальский, с. 143]. Thus, Osokin, a Russian colonial ethnographer of the early twentieth century, wrote in his rather odious 1906 work, “On the Border with Mongolia”:

Although opium smoking is persecuted by the Chinese authorities, nevertheless there were always plenty of smokers in Maimacheng, and not only among the wealthy class [Осокин, с. 55].

However, in 1913, the Russian consul, referring to the 1909 International Opium Convention, wrote about the inadmissibility of the spread of opium in Mongolia, as this could undermine the authority of Bogd Khan’s government [Сизова].

With the outbreak of war in 1914, the Kyakhta customs office was busy with the detention of German and Austro-Hungarian goods. The largest cases of that time were centered on the confiscation of vehicles belonging to German and Austrian subjects in connection with military mobilization. As a result, up to 1916, information about the smuggling of opium on the Russian-Mongolian border is irregular, and recorded volumes of opium are extremely low (no more than a few spools once a quarter). For comparison: the largest batch of 1916 was estimated at 2,506 rubles (8 poods) [ГАРБ. Ф. 102. Оп. 1. Д. 921. Л. 11]. The key year in this system of relations was 1916, since from this point the volumes of opium smuggling increased tenfold. This was due to the signing of the Treaty of Kyakhta in 1915, which changed the operating procedure of Mongolian customs. Clause 12 of the agreement stated that when Chinese merchants imported goods of any origin into Autonomous Mongolia no customs tax was provided [Батсайхан, 2018, с. 261]. In this context, customs inspections became a matter of great importance for the Russian Empire.

The main route of opium smuggling ran through Ust-Kyakhta along the river:

1916, September 23rd, to the Ust-Kyakhta customs outpost regarding the following: this date, at 10 o'clock in the afternoon, upon arrival of the steamer "Volna" from the city of Verkhneudinsk to Ust-Kyakhta settlement, we, the chief of the outpost Kafitin and the inspectors Kuzma Ozheganov, Klimenty Tsyukh, Ivan Bachu, found that a Chinese passenger, Mi De Man, who arrived on the steamer, in his clothes had 4 paper packs, gross weight 3 pounds, 94 spools, with smoking Persian opium, net weight 3 pounds, 90 spools. Estimated 160 rubles [ГАРБ. Ф. 102. Оп. 1. Д. 659, Л. 3].

In the explanation, Mi Dae Man pointed out:

The real smoking Persian opium, seized in 4 paper bundles without signs and numbers, gross weight 3 pounds, 94 spools, net weight 3 pounds 90 spools, was acquired by me in the city of Verkhneudinsk and I secretly intended to take to Maimacheng [Там же].

On the next page of the case, there is a formal reply from the vice-consul in Maimacheng:

To the Kyakhta customs officers. I have the honor to notify customs that the Chinese subject Mi De Man has not been found in Maimacheng [Там же. Л. 7 об.].

In another case dated 1916, it was noted:

I, chief of the outpost, Kafitin, with inspectors Ivan Rodinov and Stepan Butusin, today, having met the steamer "Rabotnik" that had arrived in the Ust-Kyakhta settlement at night, found one of the passengers of this steamer,

Chinese Deng Na O, with seventeen paper packs of Persian smoking opium, weighing (inaudible. – A. M.) 18 pounds 48 spools. In the presence of the detainee himself (inaudible. – A. M.): “I, a Chinese subject Deng Na O, of the Buddhist religion, 49 years old (two lines inaudible. – A. M.) live in the cities of Hailar and Verkhneudinsk, doing various jobs. I was taking the seized opium to Chinese Maimacheng for sale” [ТАРБ. Ф. 102. Оп. 2. Д. 532. Л. 3].

Punishment for foreign subjects was limited to a fine based on the detained person's seized property, in accordance with the laws of the Russian Empire. As an example, an extract can be cited from the ruling in the case of Deng Na O:

A Chinese citizen Deng Na O, in addition to the confiscation of the opium detained from him, shall be subject to a monetary sanction in the amount of five times the fee calculated for opium, that is, a total of 57 rubles 25 kopecks, by paying to replenish the treasury [Там же. Л. 7].

Illustrating the significance of the river route for smuggling opium, it is expedient to give one more representative example:

On the first day of June 1916, this protocol was drawn up at the Ust-Kyakhta customs outpost that today, at 4 o'clock in the morning, a Chinese man arrived at the pier of the Ust-Kyakhta settlement on the steamer “Burlak”, following his business to Maimacheng, on whom, during the inspection of his belongings by the chief of the outpost Kafitin, in the presence of the inspectors, six paper packs were found, gross weight 6 pounds 53 spools, with opium for smoking (terjak): “I am a Chinese citizen Mi Lin Do, 31 years old, living in the city of Verkhneudinsk and engaged in black-market work, I do not have a passport with me, I am going to Maimacheng to my brother at the mine in Iro. The seized opium, with a gross weight of 6 pounds 53 spools, was bought by me in Verkhneudinsk and I wanted to deliver the opium to the mine” [Там же. Д. 557. Л. 4].

The documents of Kyakhta customs also contain information about what happened next with the confiscated property. At the beginning of 1916, the seized opium was typically burned, as evidenced by numerous decrees. By the end of 1916 to early 1917, it began to be transferred to military hospitals with the following wording: “To send the seized opium in this case to the Office of the Supreme Chief of the Sanitary and Evacuation Unit” [Там же. Д. 624. Л. 8]. The crisis at the front and a shortage of medicines became the determining factor in the new attitude towards the confiscated opium.

According to historical sources, the opium transported across the border was in demand not only for opium smoking rooms and among Mongol princes. A significant part of it was sent to the goldfields of both Outer and Inner Mongolia. It was exchanged for gold dust by weight in a ratio of one

to one, which, given the inaccessibility and remoteness of mines, indicates excess profit with relatively low risks.

With regards to the social composition of the detained couriers, it is important to note that most of them stated that they were illiterate, and according to their social status, either peasants or small traders. Personal information was often deliberately misrepresented. Many of the couriers were mine workers and aware of the demand for this product among the miners. However, attention is drawn to the fact that they “purchased” Persian opium in 100 % of cases in Verkhneudinsk, one of the key shopping centers of Transbaikal, located on the Trans-Siberian Railway. Therefore, it can be assumed that this city was one of the main transit-points on the route of the delivery of Persian opium to Inner Asia. The fight against opium smuggling was of great political (and reputational) importance in conditions when the government of the Russian Empire actively supported the autonomist movement in Outer Mongolia.

A complete ban on the opium trade was announced in 1917. The Russian government, through its representatives, informed China that it had already issued a law banning opium smoking and trade in Russia. After this, the Chinese side was in its turn asked to issue a law banning the production of alcohol in areas bordering Russia and its import into the Empire.

* * *

The Tea Route, as a trade artery connecting the two largest continental empires in the region, was associated with the smuggling of opium from the very beginning of the nineteenth century. All the efforts of the respective central governments aimed at banning this trade had an extremely minimal impact. Low effectiveness of the fight against opium smuggling was associated with the crisis of imperial control systems. The political crisis in the Qing Empire correlated with a similar one in the Russian Empire, and both fell within 6 years of each other, triggering a period of instability throughout Central Eurasia. In this regard, a successful fight against the opium trade, which was a transnational phenomenon, required new types of state repressive instruments, as was dictated by the demands of the time.

First, technological progress transformed the structure of the trade route. The launch of the Trans-Siberian Railway, the opening of a shipping line on the Selenga River, the appearance of motorized transport such as automobiles – all this had a direct impact on the development of an informal sector of the economy. In combination with the decentralization of power in China and isolation of its outskirts, this opened up the very real prospect of the formation of a huge “gray zone” of the world economy of that time, as evidenced by the materials of the Kyakhta customs.

Second, since 1911, the opium trade had become an important part of the economy of the outskirts of the former Qing empire. The militarist regimes in the provinces replenished their budgets through the opium trade. In these conditions, the border services of the Russian Empire

were the only ones to restrain the flow of smuggling and the formation of completely criminalized enclaves near the border. However, the First World War and the subsequent series of economic and political crises brought all these efforts to zero. After the revolution of 1917, the content and nature of customs documentation changed. Furthermore, after the seizure of Kyakhta by the interventionist troops in 1918, the customs' activities ceased to exist. Paradoxically, with the disappearance of customs and border outposts, smuggling fell into decline since the main condition for the development of trade – security – disappeared.

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