

Colonial Governance and Territorial Control In The Fergana Valley: The Formation Of The Fergana Oblast Administration

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Abstract: This article examines how the Russian Empire institutionalized colonial rule in the Fergana Valley through the creation of the Fergana Oblast (province) administration after the liquidation of the Kokand Khanate. Focusing on the formative period from 1876 through the first decade of consolidated imperial governance, the study interprets “territorial control” as a complex assemblage of legal classification, spatial re-organization, bureaucratic staffing, fiscal extraction, and mediated authority. The establishment of the oblast did not merely extend an existing administrative template; it translated military conquest into an operational regime of rule by producing new borders, re-scaling local communities into imperial units, and formalizing a hierarchy of offices that connected Turkestan’s Governor-General to district and rural levels. Special attention is paid to the early uezd (district) structure, the relocation and symbolic “re-foundation” of the administrative center, and the use of statistical reporting as a governing technology. The article argues that the Fergana oblast administration became effective not primarily through the immediate replacement of local institutions, but through selective incorporation of indigenous intermediaries and normative pluralism, while retaining coercive capacity as a background condition. At the same time, the administrative order remained structurally constrained by limited personnel, informational asymmetries, and persistent contestation over land, water, and jurisdiction. The Fergana case demonstrates how imperial territorialization in Central Asia fused military, civil, and epistemic tools into a distinctive late-imperial colonial governance model.

Keywords: Russian Empire; Turkestan Governor-Generalship; Fergana Oblast; colonial administration; territorialization; uezd–volost system; statistical governance; Kokand Khanate.

Introduction: In the historiography of Russian imperial expansion, the Fergana Valley occupies a dual position: it was both a strategically decisive conquest zone and a laboratory of colonial state-building. The liquidation of the Kokand Khanate and the subsequent creation of the Fergana Oblast in 1876 translated a volatile military frontier into a legally articulated administrative territory. Yet this translation was neither automatic nor purely institutional. It required the production of new spatial categories, the redefinition of jurisdictional boundaries, and the establishment of a bureaucratic chain capable of converting violence and occupation into routine governance. The formal act of creating an oblast therefore has to be read as an attempt to stabilize sovereignty through territorialization: the

making of space legible, divisible, and governable within an imperial repertoire of rule.

The Fergana Oblast was created by imperial decree on 19 February (2 March) 1876 on the territory of the former Kokand Khanate. Its early institutional profile reflected the wider structure of Turkestan as a “military-civil” colonial periphery in which coercive authority, administrative hierarchy, and knowledge production were intimately linked. The Turkestan Governor-Generalship served as the regional apex; the oblast administration served as the intermediate level, while the uezd–volost system provided the basic grid for everyday supervision, taxation, and policing. The initial territorial division, issued by Governor-General K. P. von Kaufman on 3 (15) March 1876, created a set of

uezds—Andijan, Kokand, Margilan, Namangan, Osh, and Chust—each of which became a node where imperial priorities encountered local realities.

A key feature of this governance project was the establishment and relocation of administrative centers as instruments of symbolic and practical control. The oblast center shifted from Kokand (1876–1877) to New Margilan (later Skobelev; later Fergana), a move that signaled an intent to create a purpose-oriented colonial seat distinct from earlier political geographies. This relocation mattered because it embodied the imperial logic of separation and oversight: it reduced dependence on older urban elites while facilitating the construction of administrative infrastructure, military presence, and communication lines.

The consolidation of authority also depended on formal legal frameworks. The “Regulation on the Administration of the Turkestan Krai” (1886) codified the organization of governance and entered into force from 1 (13) January 1887; in the Fergana context it also marked a moment of administrative rationalization, including the abolition of the Chust uezd. Law was thus not merely descriptive; it was constitutive, providing an imperial language for classifying people, land, and institutions.

Finally, the Fergana oblast administration developed a robust informational dimension. Annual reviews and statistical compilations were not neutral descriptions; they functioned as a technology of power by turning social and ecological complexity—population, crops, taxation, mobility, irrigation—into standardized categories that could be compared, audited, and governed. The “Obzor Ferganskoi oblasti” series (later titled “Statistical Review”) became embedded in the reporting regime: reviews for 1887–1896 were issued as appendices to the all-submitted report of the military governor, illustrating how administrative knowledge and hierarchical accountability were institutionally fused.

Within this context, the formation of the Fergana oblast administration can be interpreted as a multi-layered effort to secure territorial control: by creating an imperial territorial grid, by reorganizing authority through a military governor and oblast board, by governing through intermediaries and plural legal arrangements, and by producing knowledge that rendered the valley administratively “thinkable.” These processes were effective enough to entrench imperial rule, yet incomplete enough to generate recurrent friction—especially around land, water, labor, and local jurisdiction. The study of the Fergana case therefore clarifies how the Russian Empire pursued colonial governance in Central Asia not only through conquest,

but through the institutionalization of everyday rule.

The aim of this article is to interpret the formation of the Fergana Oblast administration as a historically specific mechanism of colonial governance and territorial control in the late Russian Empire. The study seeks to (a) reconstruct the institutional logic of the oblast’s creation after 1876, (b) analyze how administrative territorial divisions (uezd–volost) operationalized imperial authority in the Fergana Valley, and (c) evaluate the role of legal codification and statistical reporting in stabilizing colonial rule. By focusing on the formative administrative architecture rather than solely on military conquest or economic change, the article highlights the state-building dimensions of Russian colonialism: how the empire built a governing apparatus that could classify territory, channel resources, manage social diversity, and respond to local contestation.

This article employs qualitative historical-institutional analysis. The primary evidentiary base consists of: imperial legal codification relevant to Turkestan’s governance, particularly the 1886 “Regulation on the Administration of the Turkestan Krai,” used here to interpret formal hierarchies, competencies, and administrative rationalization; administrative-statistical publications associated with the Fergana oblast, especially the “Obzor/Statistical Review” series and its institutional relationship to the military governor’s reporting; and contemporaneous administrative and inspection-based knowledge traditions, represented in scholarship through the Pahlen inspection corpus as a model of how late-imperial authorities sought to diagnose and recalibrate colonial governance.

The secondary literature is used to situate the Fergana case within comparative perspectives on Russian colonial governance, including studies of imperial administration in Turkestan and broader analyses of colonial society and reform debates under Russian rule. The article treats administrative divisions and reporting formats as analytical objects. Instead of viewing uezds, centers, and annual reviews as neutral facts, it reads them as instruments that made the valley governable: spatially (through borders and jurisdictions), socially (through classifications of population and community), and fiscally (through measurable extraction and budgetary reasoning). This interpretive approach is appropriate because the analytical “results” in a historical governance study emerge from tracing how institutions structured capacity and constraint, and how these structures shaped the practice of colonial control.

The creation of the Fergana Oblast in 1876 was the

administrative crystallization of a broader transformation: the conversion of the Kokand Khanate's political space into an imperial territory. The decree establishing the oblast explicitly linked the new unit to the former khanate's territory and to the military campaign of 1875–1876, underscoring that administrative formation was framed as the “after” of conquest, not its alternative. Yet the immediate administrative challenge was less the declaration of sovereignty than the organization of a workable chain of command in a densely populated, economically significant, and socially heterogeneous valley. The oblast served as a mediating level between the Governor-Generalship and localities, thereby enabling the empire to delegate, monitor, and recalibrate rule in a region where direct metropolitan oversight was structurally limited.

A defining territorial-control mechanism was the imposition of a district grid. The Kaufman order of 3 (15) March 1876 divided the oblast into uyezds—Andijan, Kokand, Margilan, Namangan, Osh, and Chust—each designed as an administrative container through which policing, taxation, and judicial supervision could be conducted. This division did not simply map pre-existing communities; it reorganized them. Even where boundaries partially followed older settlement patterns, the uezd logic re-scaled governance by making jurisdiction depend on an imperial unit rather than on the political landscape inherited from the khanate. The early inclusion of a Chust uezd is instructive: it indicates experimentation with territorial segmentation to improve manageability, later revised as the imperial administrative model matured.

Administrative centrality was another tool of control. The initial center in Kokand (1876–1877) was quickly replaced by New Margilan, which became the oblast capital for 1877–1920. The move had practical rationales—military security, administrative construction, and control over transport and communication—but it also had symbolic meaning. By anchoring governance in a reconfigured center, imperial authorities reduced dependence on a historically significant khanate city and made visible a new order of authority. The later renaming of New Margilan to Skobelev further inscribed conquest memory into the administrative landscape. Such center-making can be understood as a spatial strategy: it concentrated the bureaucratic apparatus in a controlled site while projecting authority outward through uezd and rural structures.

The oblast administration's institutional core was the military governor and associated offices, reflecting Turkestan's hybrid regime of military and civil

authority. While the precise competencies varied by regulation and practice, the structural logic remained consistent: coercive capacity and administrative routine were intertwined. This arrangement facilitated rapid response to unrest and enabled the empire to treat security and governance as mutually reinforcing. However, it also produced chronic tensions. Military priorities could override developmental or legal rationalization, while civil administrative routines could be hampered by limited staffing and the complexity of local conditions. The governance model thus combined strong formal hierarchy with practical fragility, a pattern characteristic of colonial administrations that relied on small cadres governing large and diverse populations.

The 1886 “Regulation on the Administration of the Turkestan Krai” is best read as a moment of attempted standardization. In the Fergana case, it is associated with the abolition of the Chust uezd and entered into force from 1 (13) January 1887. This change illustrates how imperial governance evolved through cycles of division and consolidation. Early on, finer segmentation could appear desirable for control; later, consolidation could reduce administrative overhead and align the oblast's structure with standardized models across the region. Abolition of a uezd was therefore not merely a cartographic adjustment. It was an administrative decision about how to distribute limited personnel, how to supervise rural governance, and how to optimize reporting lines.

Territorial control also required a system capable of reaching rural society, and in practice the empire's reach depended on mediated authority. Rural administration in Turkestan commonly relied on indigenous intermediaries—local elders, community notables, and functionaries whose legitimacy was grounded in local social orders rather than in imperial appointment alone. This mediation was not a sign of weakness only; it was a governance technique that reduced the transaction costs of rule. Yet it created structural vulnerabilities. Intermediaries could filter information, resist certain demands, or exploit their position, thereby turning imperial governance into a contested field of negotiation. The oblast administration thus operated through layered sovereignty: formal imperial supremacy combined with local authority forms that were partially co-opted and partially autonomous. The outcome was a governance regime that was administratively “present” through categories and reporting, but uneven in its capacity to shape everyday life without collaboration.

The legal dimension of colonial rule further demonstrates this layered arrangement. The 1886 regulation provided a codified framework, but

governance in Turkestan historically involved legal pluralism, where imperial law interacted with local normative systems. From a territorial-control perspective, pluralism could be functional because it allowed the empire to govern without fully replacing established legal practices. But it also produced ambiguity and conflict over jurisdiction, especially in cases that intersected property, family law, and communal rights. Inspection traditions and administrative debates repeatedly pointed to this tension between imperial attempts to rationalize law and the persistence of local legal practice. In this sense, the Fergana oblast administration was less a machine of uniform legal imposition than a managerial structure operating within a plural legal environment, seeking governability rather than complete homogenization.

Fiscal and infrastructural control constituted another axis of territorial governance. In an irrigated valley economy, land and water were not merely resources but also administrative problems: they required measurement, taxation categories, adjudication procedures, and control over labor and mobility. The production of land-tax materials and statistical descriptions is therefore central to understanding how the oblast was made governable. Even when framed as descriptive, such materials shaped policy by establishing what could be “seen” and acted upon. The Fergana administration’s knowledge practices were thus inseparable from its extractive and developmental ambitions, including the management of agricultural production, the expansion of cotton cultivation, and the organization of transport links.

The “Obzor/Statistical Review” series exemplifies the epistemic infrastructure of rule. The long-term production of reviews and their integration into the military governor’s reporting regime indicate that statistics and narrative description functioned as accountability instruments and as technologies that rendered the oblast legible to imperial oversight. Numbers and tables were governance artifacts: they enabled the governor to demonstrate control, justify budgetary requests, frame problems such as migration or irrigation, and present the oblast as administratively coherent to higher authorities. In this sense, the practical “result” of statistical governance was the creation of a standardized interface between the colonial periphery and the mechanisms of imperial oversight.

At the same time, reliance on reviews reveals a persistent problem: the valley’s complexity could not be fully captured by administrative categories. Statistical compilations could obscure informal practices, underreport conflict, or misread local dynamics. Moreover, the production of knowledge

often depended on the same intermediaries whose interests could diverge from imperial objectives. The regime of control therefore contained an internal contradiction. It sought to stabilize governance through legibility, but legibility itself was shaped by limited capacity and political mediation. The administrative center could demand reports; it could not automatically guarantee their accuracy or translate them into compliance across diverse localities.

A further constraint was the shortage of qualified personnel and the distance from metropolitan administrative resources. Comparative studies of Russian colonial society and administration in Turkestan underscore that imperial governance often functioned through small official communities that were socially segmented and administratively stretched. The implications extend to oblast governance: administrative capacity was uneven, and colonial practices could reproduce insular routines that complicated reform. In such conditions, coercion could suppress unrest, but long-term territorial control required a routinized administration capable of adjudicating disputes, collecting revenue, and managing development without provoking continuous resistance.

Taken together, the analysis supports three interpretive results. First, the formation of the Fergana oblast administration was a deliberate territorialization project: it created a governable space through uezd segmentation, center relocation, and codified hierarchy. Second, the administration achieved operational control primarily through mediated governance and plural institutional arrangements rather than through complete institutional replacement. Third, statistical and reporting practices were not auxiliary but constitutive, linking local administration to imperial oversight and providing a framework for policy justification and periodic reorganization. These results illuminate why the Fergana case is analytically valuable: it shows colonial governance as a negotiated, knowledge-driven, and spatially structured project whose effectiveness depended on both coercive foundations and administrative pragmatism.

The formation of the Fergana Oblast administration after 1876 illustrates how the Russian Empire operationalized colonial governance in Central Asia through territorial control mechanisms that were simultaneously spatial, legal, bureaucratic, and epistemic. The oblast’s creation by imperial decree, followed by rapid subdivision into uezds and the relocation of the administrative center, demonstrates that the empire understood rule as requiring a durable territorial grid rather than a mere declaration of

sovereignty. The early uezd structure—Andijan, Kokand, Margilan, Namangan, Osh, and Chust—was designed to make the valley administratively tractable, while the later abolition of the Chust uezd under the 1886 regulation shows that territorial control was continuously recalibrated to match administrative capacity and standardization goals.

At the institutional level, the oblast administration exemplified Turkestan’s military-civil governance model: coercive authority and civil routine were fused in ways that strengthened the state’s ability to respond to unrest but also generated structural tensions and dependence on local intermediaries. Territorial control therefore did not rest on uniform institutional imposition. Instead, it relied on selective incorporation of indigenous governance resources and on legal pluralism that enabled everyday rule without full juridical homogenization. This strategy lowered the costs of administration, but it created enduring ambiguities over jurisdiction and facilitated information filtering by intermediaries.

Finally, the Fergana case reveals the centrality of knowledge production. The integration of the “Obzor/Statistical Review” series into the military governor’s reporting regime indicates that statistics and narrative reviews functioned as accountability instruments and as technologies that rendered the oblast legible to imperial oversight. Yet the same dependence on reporting also exposed the limits of control: legibility was partial, contested, and shaped by capacity constraints. The overall picture is therefore of a colonial administration that consolidated power through territorialization and standardized reporting, while remaining structurally dependent on negotiation, mediation, and periodic reorganization. This interpretation contributes to a more precise understanding of Russian colonial governance as a dynamic state-building process—one that fused space-making, law, bureaucracy, and administrative knowledge into a distinctive pattern of imperial rule in the Fergana Valley.

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