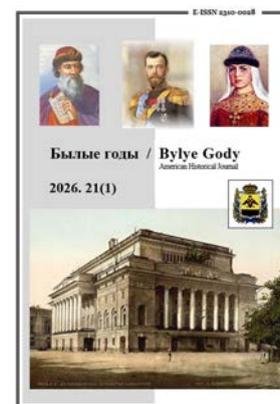


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## Eyes and Ears of the Empire: Postal and Telegraph Service in Semirechye

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### Abstract

The proposed article examines the understudied scientific issue of the role of the postal and telegraph service in Semirechye to monitor the citizens of the empire. This article has reviewed the surveillance process in the Russian Empire, aiming to protect the population from factors that could influence their consciousness.

This article aims to determine the implementation of practices of censorship and letter interception (perlustration) in the Russian Empire, as well as the organisation of postal and telegraph institutions and their employees for these purposes. Based on historical data and research, this article has examined the issues of covert surveillance and letter perlustration. This article also discusses the activities of the “Black Chambers” across the empire, the use of postal and telegraph institution employees for covert surveillance by special agencies, and the involvement of local populations in surveillance activities. The materials used for this article include the archives of the Central Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan, regulatory acts, official letters, and statistical reports from postal and telegraph institutions.

Surveillance was organized privately from the public, and maintaining trust in communication institutions and their staff was crucial for the successful execution of these activities. A central aspect of this Semirechye activity lacked legislation.

**Keywords:** Perlustration, Black Offices, correspondence, mail, telegraph, post roads, postal and telegraph institutions.

### 1. Introduction

The idea of uniting the postal and telegraph administrations of all nations into a single Universal Postal Union has emerged to strengthen international relations. To initiate this concept, the Russian Empire played a vital role, and the Union was established on October 9, 1874, initially having different states and colonies. During its initiation phase, it was based on 33 million square kilometres along with the population of 330 million. By 1901, the Union’s territory expanded to 106 million square kilometres, encompassing 1.102 billion people. The total land area of the Earth, including Greenland and the Polar Regions, was around 136 million square kilometres with an estimated population of 1.5 billion. However, the Universal Postal Union covered approximately three-quarters of the Earth’s land, having around two-thirds of the global population. Within this network, Russia held the largest share in terms of territory and controlled around one-fifth of the Union’s total area.

Russia, in terms of population, was placed in second place with around 125 million people. However, India and Britain were placed at the first rank with a population of around 295 million. Despite its vast territory, Russia’s population density was much lower, with around 5.9 people per square kilometre compared to 132 to 216 in the United Kingdom, 110 in Italy, and 97 in Germany. A noticeable impact of this infrastructural disparity was observed, whereas in Germany, one postal-telegraph office served 1,230 residents, while in Russia, a single office had to serve 20,800 residents. Based on the data from the

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Postal-Telegraph Journal, Buchgeim (Buchgeim, 1906) has highlighted the enormous workload of Russia's postal-telegraph service. The staff were struggling because of low salaries, and other challenges also emerged because of inadequate state funding. These difficulties led to the postal-telegraph service's unpopularity among Russian officials, and a similar trend was also observed in Central Asia.

According to Morrison (Morrison, 2019a: 11), Central Asia's economic and strategic value was ambiguous. Despite the efforts of the Turkestan governors-general to project the region as a key asset, the annexation of the generalship of Turkestan Governor-General ensued between 1853 and 1881. The campaigns in Turkestan took place in remote regions, and these areas held questionable economic and strategic significance and were inhabited by populations often described as "savages", "fanatics," or Primitive Asians. However, they were not perceived as serious threats.

The perception of Turkestan has been identified as a dangerous and unstable frontier because of poor governance, limited resources, and institutional inertia. Moreover, Turkestan is rarely mentioned in mainstream English-language histories of the XIX-century Russian military (Morrison, 2023: 2). Furthermore, Uyama (Uyama, 2020: 3) has further emphasised the absence of civil registry books, revealed during the 1916 uprisings, and recognised as a symptom of Central Asia's weak integration into the Russian Empire. A limited reach has also been observed for the imperial authority in the region's local society, and the introduction of new wartime measures led to significant conflicts. Another consequence of the region's late annexation was that by the early XX century, Turkestan had produced the smallest number of indigenous intelligentsia educated in new schools compared to other parts of the empire.

It is also important to identify that Semirechye, at the turn of the XIX and XX centuries, was a polyethnic and multicultural centre. The migration of Russian settlers, along with the relocation of Dungsans, Uyghurs, and others, contributed to this diversity. However, Morrison (Morrison, 2012: 329) has argued that the demographic composition of Semirechye can be understood as a "plural society" because different communities lived side by side and engaged in economic exchanges. However, they remained divided by language, religion, lifestyle, and a noticeable impact of social hierarchy is also identified in this segregation.

Among the Semirechye's population, the highest ratio was of Kazakh and Kyrgyz individuals because of their nomadic lifestyle; however, they were absent from urban centres. Through this dynamic, the region was able to maintain its distinct identity despite the diverse influences of various ethnic groups and cultures. In this regard, Central Asia and Semirechye are key for understanding late imperial Russian colonial thought (Morrison, 2019b; Morrison, 2012).

The key objective of this article is to critically evaluate the functioning of the postal and telegraph service in Semirechye as a tool of colonial surveillance and control exercised by the Russian Empire. This article has also demonstrated how this communication institution served not only as a means of information exchange but also as a disciplinary mechanism aligned with Michel Foucault's concept of biopower. The study further investigates how the everyday governance of the imperial periphery embedded practices of observation, information control, and the involvement of local agents by applying a critical approach to examine the role of the postal-telegraph service as an instrument of surveillance. This article also offers insights into how the imperial communication system evolved, despite the small number of Europeans in Central Asia's colonial bureaucracies. However, this article does not provide a conceptual definition of surveillance in Tsarist Russia, but it is focused on how postal-telegraph organizations implemented surveillance through their interactions with state agencies and local populations. The empire's limited control over the region shaped the development of Semirechye's unique identity, the basis for this analysis. The study illustrates how the level of surveillance over imperial subjects corresponded with the extent of imperial influence in the region.

## 2. Materials and methods

The data used in this article was based on the information published by CSA RK (Central Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan). The information included:

- Fund 194: "Vernensky Regional Postal and Telegraph Office of the Turkestan Postal and Telegraph District (1872–1917)" (CSA RK. F. 194. Op. 1).
- Fund 188: "Sergiopol Postal and Telegraph Office, Turkestan Postal and Telegraph District. City of Sergiopol, Semirechye Region (1914–1916)." (CSA RK. F. 188. Op. 1)
- Fund 199: "Jarkent Postal and Telegraph Office, Turkestan Postal and Telegraph District, City of Jarkent, Semirechye Region (1901–1916)" (CSA RK. F.199. Op. 1).
- Fund 201: "Lepsinsk Telegraph Station, Turkestan Postal and Telegraph Agency, City of Lepsinsk, Semirechye Region (1870–1917)" (CSA RK. F. 201. Op. 1).
- Fund 2300: "Reports on Public Sentiment in Semirechye Region (February 8, 1914 – January 8, 1915)" (CSA RK. F.2300. Op. 8. D. 15. L. 1-17);
- Fund 41: List 1, Books I and II: "Vernensky District Administration (1862–1919)" (CSA RK. F.41. Op. 1).

Moreover, different archival documents were also examined to analyze the functioning of postal and telegraph institutions and their personnel. This study has also employed legal acts, orders, official correspondence, and statistical reports from central and local postal and telegraph institutions, as well as letters from regional postal and telegraph offices.

This study is grounded in Michel Foucault's concept of biopower. In his major works, Foucault conceptualizes biopower as a new form of power exercised through surveillance for the purpose of regulating and controlling life. Michel Foucault has further defined that power permeates all spheres of society due to its ability to structure and govern everyday life subtly through disciplinary institutions. Among such institutions, schools, barracks and hospitals are within the scope of this study; postal and telegraph offices are not.

This article also focuses on the practice of power implementation, known as perustration. According to Foucault's theory, power functions most effectively when it is continuous and invisible. In this context, perustration in Semirechye has been identified as a noticeable example of Foucault's model of panopticism. Individuals, believing they are under constant surveillance, begin to regulate their own actions and behavior. Such mechanisms contribute to the formation of a disciplinary society in which internal self-regulation becomes a result of external observation (Foucault, 1995: 135-228). This aligns with the arguments presented by Scott (1998), where simplification, categorization, and surveillance are considered core strategies of state governance. Within the framework of the imperial state, these strategies enabled the clarification of social conditions and made it possible to monitor public sentiment and population mobility.

This research also draws on the concept of information management as presented by Holquist (Holquist, 1997: 418). During World War I, state and public institutions were actively engaged in monitoring public sentiments and opinions. The functions of these institutions were dual in nature: first, they focused on information collection (informing authorities about the populace), and second, they emphasized propaganda (informing the public). Holquist's analysis also identifies two types of information management or surveillance. The first is repressive, aimed at preventing the dissemination of dissenting ideas and punishing such actions, while the second involves gathering information to shape specific policies (including informing, inspiring, enlightenment, propaganda, or agitation). The author concludes that these two types coexist, although their relationship is significant. The first type relates to a model of territorial control, while the second pertains to a model of population management. In this context, censorship is identified as the primary source for information gathering.

### 3. Discussion

The subject of postal and telegraph services in the Russian Empire has been widely analyzed in the works of Buchheim (Buchheim, 1906), Bazilevich (Bazilevich, 1927) and Morev (Morev, 2019). According to Buchheim (Buchheim, 1906: 15), the postal and telegraph infrastructure is not a revenue source but a significant driver of progress, offering considerable opportunities to the state. Furthermore, the issues associated with population and surveillance control in the Russian Empire were addressed through three different studies by Lauchlan (Lauchlan, 2002), Shashaev et al. (Shashaev, 2017) and Peregudova (Peregudova, 2000). On the other hand, the studies for censorship and military censorship were conducted by Izmozik (Izmozik, 2023), Daly (Daly, 1998), Holquist (Holquist, 1997) and Zhdanova (Zhdanova, 2018). On the other hand, the studies of Uyama (Uyama, 2020), Morrison (Morrison, 2019a), Sultangalieva (Sultangalieva, 2015), and Bimoldanova et al. (Bimoldanova et al., 2018) were used to guide the analysis of the political and economic integration of Central Asia into the Russian Empire.

Scholarly interest in the history of censorship in the Russian Empire emerged at the end of the XIX century, which led to the development of various key studies. Peregudova (Peregudova, 2000: 276) has defined censorship as a method of political investigation by the Police Department between 1880 and 1917. Her monograph "Political Investigations of Russia (1880–1917)" includes a chapter based on previously unexplored archival materials that shed light on censorship during this period. Moreover, Izmozik (Izmozik, 2023: 40) has published a seminal study on surveillance and censorship in the Russian Empire. The study delves into the functioning of censorship centres and the subsequent adaptation of censorship practices by the Soviet Union, with a particular emphasis on the concept of political control. On the other hand, Daly (Daly, 2016: 471-472) has further examined the role of the secret police in the Russian Empire, showing how intercepted materials were used by law enforcement agencies to provide intelligence, predict issues, and manage revolutionaries. The scope of surveillance allowed the authorities to anticipate potential problems, which resulted in enhanced control.

### 4. Results

#### Observation by Employees of the Postal-Telegraph Service

According to Holquist (Holquist, 1997: 418), the Russian Empire intended to avoid uncovering public sentiments and aimed to do more than simply keep people under control. The primary objective of the Russian Empire was to influence and change individuals, and due to this, surveillance encompassed both the collection of information on public attitudes and the approaches used to focus on transforming their attitudes. The purpose of this observation was not to exert more control over society; however, it aims to protect people from harmful influences that could adversely affect the population because of heretical ideas, books, or ideologies. The state collected the necessary information to prevent the dissemination of what it considered undesirable content. To evaluate these aspects, two different mechanisms were employed. Firstly,

a bureaucratic oversight system was established for regular reporting on public sentiment, and secondly, the state routinely engaged in the interception of correspondence.

The concept of perustration, also known as the secret and unlawful reading of correspondence, was widely practiced. Scholars have debated to evaluate the difference between the concepts of censorship and perustration within the context of postal and telegraph surveillance, with many noting the difficulty in separating the two. Daly (Daly, 1998: 42) has analyzed perustration as one of the methods employed by special agencies, such as the secret police and the gendarmerie, to gather information and maintain security. However, this practice did not function as a comprehensive system of social control. Rather, it operated as a selective instrument targeting limited revolutionary underground networks within autocratic regimes. Izmozik (2023) likewise emphasizes that perustration was primarily focused on a narrow circle of political dissidents and was used to gauge public moods and attitudes toward the authorities. Such investigative practices formed the basis for identifying conspiracies and criminal activities. In a similar vein, Holquist (Holquist, 1997: 420-421) explains that perustration relied on the interception and reading of private correspondence in order to reveal what individuals were writing and thinking, distinguishing it from censorship, which was intended to regulate and control content. The creation of state organs specifically designed for the quantitative assessment and analysis of public attitudes, whether pro-government, anti-government, or indifferent, was a qualitatively new development. Therefore, observation is not merely important because it generated various materials on public opinion or national morality, but because it reflected the state's growing concern with public sentiment. However, the essence of observation aimed to preserve the constructed narrative of reality and prevent the introduction of harmful information into the minds and consciousness of the populace. Maintaining control over the flow of ideas in a changing world required considerable effort.

In the Russian Empire, the practices of perustration and censorship were modelled after the "Black Cabinets" employed in European countries. For instance, Napoleon's reign in France influenced the "Black Cabinets" in the Russian Empire. France had refined its "Cabinets noirs", where officials developed a system for organizing state documents related to insurgents ("Bertillon system of filing"). This system was actively adopted in the Russian Empire, and this system, designed to identify criminals using detailed photographic records, was implemented in the empire, albeit in a more rudimentary form.

During World War I, France and Germany conducted widespread perustration of domestic mail. For example, wartime efforts to assess soldiers' morale and emotional state through perustration revealed significant psychological distress. In this context, the French government methodically compiled regular reports on soldiers' morale (Geist) and attitudes (Stimmung). Concerned about national morale, the French government intensified its secret surveillance efforts after 1917. The French Army General Staff issued bulletins on internal morale based on the analysis of censorship materials that affected both soldiers and civilians (Holquist, 1997: 438-441).

Despite being technically illegal in the Russian Empire during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, perustration was justified under the absolute monarchy by the criminal code, "The Penal Code of Criminal and Correctional Punishments." It allowed highly secret yet legally sanctioned actions: "It is not considered an abuse of power 1) when a minister or other state official departs from ordinary rules in their actions based on special or general authorization granted by the supreme authority for this or similar cases" (Ulozheniye o nakazaniyah..., 1885: 230).

During the mid-XVIII century, perustration became a tool of foreign policy, and it was used regularly in a well-established Russian society. By the second half of the XIX century, the letters of all individuals, except the monarch, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and the head of the Third Department, were subject to reading (Daly, 2016: 469). In the early XIX century, those under surveillance primarily included opposition groups and close relatives of the emperor. Additionally, the empire monitored local elites from newly annexed regions who were dissatisfied with their conditions. Furthermore, Izmozik (Izmozik, 2023: 57-59) asserts that surveillance also encompassed populations in unrest-prone regions. Scholars note that the empire's primary surveillance focus was on Western countries such as Lithuania, Poland, and Finland.

In the second half of the XIX century, "Black Cabinets" were established in major cities of the Russian Empire, particularly in its Southern and Western regions. These cabinets were located in post offices in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Warsaw, Odessa, Kyiv, Kharkiv, and Tiflis, along with the censorship department overseeing foreign newspapers and magazines. During wartime, mobile post offices were also created, and postmasters were working as perustration agents. This has been observed in 1812, officials' letters were monitored, establishing a long-standing surveillance practice, and from 1813 to 1814, correspondence in these territories was also scrutinized (Daly, 1998; Izmozik, 2023).

On November 21, 1826, at the suggestion of the Moscow postal director, perustration was also introduced in Tobolsk to monitor Siberian correspondence. Consequently, on December 16, 1826, Tsar Nicholas I approved the "Regulation for the Establishment of a Secret Expedition at the Siberian Post Office" to monitor exiled criminals and their spouses. This "Secret Expedition" was based on four members, which mainly included a senior official, his assistant, and two junior officers. The titular counsellor ban was appointed head of the expedition. Moreover, two additional "Black Cabinets" were also established in Siberia, in Tyumen and Irkutsk, on June 5, 1834. However, "Black Cabinets" operated under the guise of censoring

foreign newspapers and magazines in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, Warsaw, Kyiv, and Odessa and secret expeditions in Kazan, Tiflis, and Kharkiv. Moreover, in 1908, the perлуstration centre in Kazan was closed (Izmozik, 2023).

According to secret regulations, the letters of three people in the Russian Empire were never to be opened, i.e. the Emperor, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and the Head of the Third Department (or, after its dissolution, the head of the Police Department). Furthermore, perлуstration was conducted alphabetically or through random selection. If a randomly selected letter attracted the interest of political investigation authorities, various measures were analyzed, which mainly included determining the author's identity and address were determined, and the individual was placed under secret surveillance. Their correspondence could also be monitored to gather information about their contacts and intentions.

Izmozik (Izmozik, 2023: 119-123) has further defined that occasionally, the police department would issue informal instructions regarding perлуstration. For example, on January 11, 1911, the Council of Ministers issued a decree abolishing university autonomy and holding university administrations responsible for student unrest. The order triggered protests among students and faculty, leading to repression. At the time, the list of individuals among faculty members whose letters were perлуstrated included V.R. Williams, E.N. Trubetskoy, A.F. Fortunatov (Moscow), V.E. Grabar and M.I. Rostovtsev (Dorpat), S.P. Vologdin (Novocherkassk), and N.Y. Novombergsky (Tomsk).

When considering who would be placed under surveillance and under what circumstances, individuals with ties to criminal elements or those whose actions posed a threat to public safety were placed under covert observation. All of their movements and contacts were strictly monitored. All of these individuals were unaware of the surveillance, and their personal freedom and civil rights remained officially unrestricted. Moreover, covert surveillance was also conducted until suspicion was cleared or criminal evidence was identified. On the other hand, open surveillance was imposed on individuals deemed morally or politically unreliable, involving preventive measures rather than harsh punishment. Such surveillance could be initiated by an administrative order or a court ruling. Strict open surveillance was characterized by tight police oversight and limitations on personal freedom and certain rights. The nature of the surveillance regime depended on the authority that imposed it (Spisok lits..., 1904: 1).

On March 12 1882, the regulations on police supervision were adopted, aiming to maintain public order and peace; all police and gendarmerie were tasked with conducting both open (glaring) and covert (secret) surveillance of political criminals and unreliable individuals (Daly, 1998: 41). In certain cases, the Minister of Internal Affairs could prohibit individuals under surveillance from receiving any correspondence. In such instances, lists of these individuals were sent to local postal and telegraph offices. Letters and telegrams addressed to them were forwarded to the head of the gendarmerie department in large cities and to the district chief in rural areas, and in cases where the content was prohibited, the correspondence was handed over to the gendarmerie (Tokareva, 2009: 194-204).

### Was postal perлуstration implemented in Semirechye?

During the late XIX century, Semirechye was served by 19 postal and telegraph offices (See Figure 1).

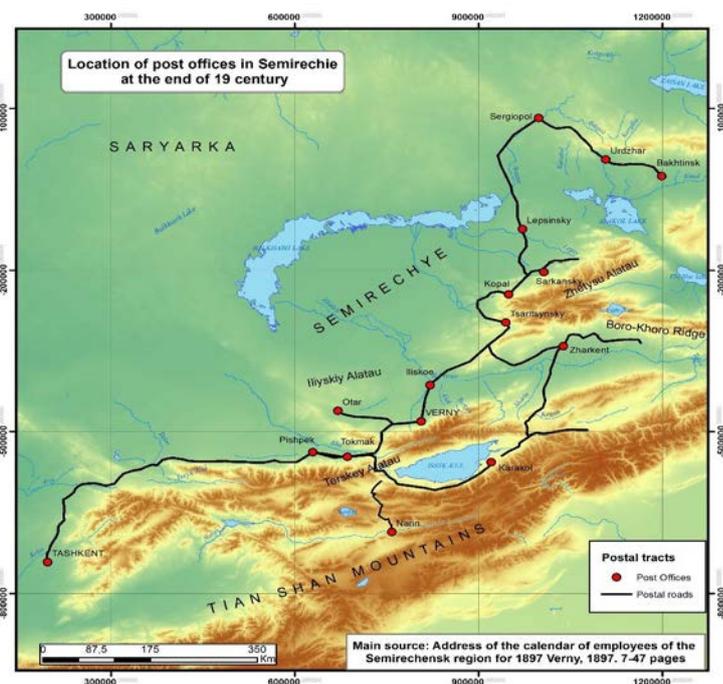


Fig. 1. Location of post offices in Semirechye at the end of the XIX century

Figure 1 illustrates the overview of the Semirechye Region at the end of the XIX century, with six postal routes, covering a distance of 2,168<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> versts (approximately 2,312.82 km), employing between 76 and 138 staff members. For instance, statistics from 1897 indicate that Semirechye, with a population of 990,107, was serviced by only 20 postal offices, staffed by 137 employees, resulting in each staff member serving about 7,000 residents. By the second half of the XIX century, six integrated postal routes were established in Semirechye (*Obzor Semirechenskoi oblasti...*, 1886: 50).

Dirt roads, measuring approximately 2,156 versts, were the primary mode of transportation along these routes. Postal and telegraph employees traversed an average of 946,334 versts annually along these routes (*CSA RK. F. 194. Op. 1. D.19a. L. 122*; *Iskakova et al., 2024*; *Iskakova, Teleuova, 2024*). Moreover, the contributions of the residents, along with zemstvo and public resources, funded the maintenance of these roads. As a result, the quality of postal routes was generally superior to that of other roads, making them highly sought after by the local population (*Rabochaia komissiia...*, 1909: 145). Furthermore, the temporary regulations governing the management of the Semirechye and Syrdarya regions stated that the local nomads were liable to pay taxes for the repair and maintenance of bridges, roads, and postal routes. It was reported that residents were taxed about 10-15 kopecks, and labour taxes were also covered by the local population (*Obzor Semirechenskoi oblasti...*, 1884: 35). Despite the use of local resources for communication services, residents continued to harbor a significant lack of trust (*Iskakova, Teleuova, 2024*).

In the Semirechye region, the Tsarist administration exhibited a distinct character, with its power failing to penetrate deeply within the local society. The administrative system in this region was two-tiered, consisting of Russian high officials (such as governors-general, governors, and district commandants) and local lower officials including volost and rural elders and local judges. However, a predominant authority was observed for the Russian officials because of their low number and disconnection from the local society, which means they have a limited understanding of the local conditions. Moreover, Russian officials could have recruited local elites by making them nobility, as they did with Tatars, Bashkirs, and Caucasians. On the other hand, this practice was rarely observed in the Central Asian region, but a few exceptions were applied. This is mainly observed because of a dismissive attitude toward nomadic peoples. During the uprising in 1916, and due to this dismissive attitude toward nomadic peoples, many indigenous administrators refused to take on intermediary roles, such as clarifying the decree's meaning or pacifying the population. Although Russian officials often had to rely on local administrators for gathering information about the local situation, they did not allow them to occupy important positions. Russian officials did not trust indigenous officials, and in their reports, notes, and other documents, they frequently used terms such as “fanaticism”, “unreliability,” and “low citizenship” in reference to Central Asians (*Uyama, 2019: 3*).

A significant role is being played by the volost rulers in one of the lower tiers of local administration. Under the Statute on Siberian Kazakhs, volosts were to be governed by sultans, who, under 52, were designated as 12th-class officials (*Sultangalieva, 2015*). The requirement for volost administrators to be proficient in the Russian language was not explicitly stated. Research indicates that in the Akmolinsk region, only a small number of candidates possessed knowledge of Russian. Though in the early XX century, the majority of documents, particularly reports to higher authorities, were often signed in Russian (*Bimoldanova et al., 2018*). A noticeable impact of the lack of literacy in Russian among many volost administrators resulted in a reliance on clerks for documentation and communication. The responsibility for maintaining written records for the volost rulers rested with the clerk. The duties of the volost clerk (pisar') were not explicitly detailed in the 1868 and 1891 Regulations, and the clerk lived in the same place as the volost administrator.

Among the positions within the volost administration that received financial compensation during the second half of the XIX century were volost administrators, clerks, and messengers. During the period under consideration in Semirechye, postal and telegraph institutions, as well as mailboxes, were not yet established in the volosts and villages, and letters, shipments, telegrams, announcements, decrees, and important information were delivered to the villagers by the volost rulers and clerks. This is clearly illustrated in a secret circular from the head of the Turkestan postal and telegraph department in 1903. The Department of Police informed the Chief of the Main Administration of Posts and Telegraphs that a significant number of letters addressed to various individuals, predominantly peasants, containing criminal proclamations, were sent from both abroad and within the empire during the past and current years. Most of these letters were dropped into mailboxes at railway stations, as evidenced by the stamps on the envelopes.

According to established procedures, postal and telegraph institutions transmit regular correspondence addressed to rural residents to the volost rulers for proper distribution. As a result, a substantial number of proclamations reached the peasants, who kept and shared them with others. The circular directives from June 15, 1895, No. 20, confirmed on July 1, 1902, No. 42, provide essential guidelines and indicate that postal and telegraph institutions must pay special attention to a significant number of letters addressed to villages that share the same format and exhibit variations in handwriting on the envelopes” (*CSA RK. F. 201. Op. 1. D. 11. L. 1–10b*).

In 1898, information regarding the “Andijan Uprising” was published in the newspaper “Semirechenskiye Oblastnye Vedomosti” and sent via mail to seven rural districts and one settlement in the Semirechye region. This information was disseminated to the villagers within the volost through administrators. For example, M. Kishibekov, the head of the Lower Iliysky volost in Verny District, reported

to the head of the Verny District: “In compliance with the directive dated October 6 of this year... I have the honour to inform Your Excellency that the announcement from the Governor-General of Turkestan regarding the disturbances in the Fergana region has been communicated to the population at the village meetings by the Kyrgyz of the volost entrusted to me” (CSA RK. F. 41. Op. 1. D. 96. L. 108).

Volost rulers and their clerks (pisar) were responsible for monitoring the citizens of the villages. For instance, the volost leaders of the Kazakh and Taranchin volosts, along with their clerks, were instructed by the Semirechye Regional Administration to conduct covert surveillance on pilgrims returning from Mecca. They were particularly vigilant to ensure that these individuals did not spread harmful rumors regarding events in the Far East and were required to report any suspicious activities to the regional administration. The archive materials reveal a rare occurrence of Kazakh names among the senders and recipients of postal packages, letters, and other correspondence. However, volost administrators frequently appear in each “acceptance-transfer list”. In the Sergiopol postal and telegraph office, the names of the Akchaulinsky volost administrator and the Arganachinsky volost administrator are often mentioned. Thus, volost administrators and their clerks may have been engaged in covert surveillance, which compelled them to independently review and identify suspicious correspondence (CSA RK. F.41. Op. 1. D.197. L. 2; CSA RK. F. 188. Op. 1. D 6. L. 122-122ob., 165).

During the period under review in the Semirechye region, there were no “Black Cabinets”, and postal and telegraph office employees did not directly engage in surveillance (perlustration). We suggest that this task was handled by the gendarmerie, police department, and the local administrative bodies, either through specific instructions or on their own initiative. In 1905, the head of the Verny postal and telegraph service, in a letter to the prosecutor of the Verny District Court, enquired about whether the police officer had the authority to take the following actions. The officer of the 1st police department of the city of Verny, in a communication dated October 30 of this year, No. 16, asks me to inform him about the postal and telegraphic correspondence received and sent by Georgy Lavrentyev Vyatkin, a teacher at the Verny Kolpakov third-class school, whom he has implicated as a defendant in a state crime, for the purpose of seizing and inspecting said correspondence. In connection with this, I ask Your Excellency to inform me whether he is authorised to carry out the seizure and inspection of the correspondence addressed to the aforementioned teacher, Vyatkin (CSA RK. F. 194. Op. 1. D. 34. L.212–212ob.). In response, he was informed that the officer of the 1st police department of Verny, in agreement with the prosecutor of the Verny District Court, was required to obtain information about the correspondence received and sent by Georgy Lavrentyev Vyatkin, a teacher at the Verny Kolpakov third-class school, who was accused of a state crime, for the purpose of seizing and inspecting the mentioned correspondence (CSA RK. F. 194. Op. 1. D. 34. L. 213–213ob.).

The main role of this organization is to provide services in Semirechye, but the lack of clear legal regulations in legislative acts and the unlawful nature of its implementation by the institution’s employees have undermined its performance. Since perlustration was carried out secretly, the limited amount of available data on this process remains a significant issue. Each department, including postal and telegraph office employees, followed specific protocols, opening and reading letters and dispatches sent to them, thereby enabling access to the content. Based on the analysis, postal and telegraph workers were responsible only for identifying suspicious correspondence of citizens that could be subjected to perlustration, forwarding it to the relevant authorities, and then delivering it to the addressee. They were not authorized to open, read, or make conclusions about the content of the letters. One example illustrating that postal and telegraph employees were often unaware of perlustration conducted by other state agencies is evident from local law enforcement’s frequent urgent requests to detain or open correspondence at postal and telegraph stations. In the cities of Verny and Zharkent, military censorship was in operation (CSA RK. F. 194. Op. 1. D. 119. L. 9), which likely meant that perlustration of letters took place primarily in these cities or that letters were forwarded for perlustration to Tashkent (CSA RK. F. 194. Op. 1. D. 140. L. 2).

The information regarding this can be identified in a 1915 circular stating that “On October 20, it was ordered that all domestic parcel shipments and all letters awaiting collection be inspected by the censor. The inspection will be conducted at regional offices in Ashgabat, Samarkand, Skobelev, Zharkent, and Verny. I instruct the institutions receiving domestic control shipments and letters awaiting collection to send them to the mentioned offices in special mail packets labelled for inspection by military censorship” (CSA RK. F. 194. Op. 1. D. 126. L. 1).

In other cities, this likely occurred rarely and sporadically, which caused confusion and frustration among postal and telegraph employees. A circular from the Head of the Turkestan Postal and Telegraph District, dated October 21, 1904, sent to the heads of postal and telegraph institutions in the Turkestan district, highlights this issue: “The General Directorate of Post and Telegraphs, observing cases where gendarmerie officers... request immediate access to inspect and send correspondence upon their request, but the Heads of institutions, in accordance with paragraph 5 of the circular from March 23 this year, No. 53, refuse to comply with such requests until permission is obtained from their Chief Local Authority to avoid possible disputes between the investigators and the Heads of postal and telegraph institutions regarding the detention, inspection, and seizure of correspondence, instructed to clarify: ...in cases where it is necessary to inspect and seize postal and telegraph correspondence at the request of the Gendarmerie Administration officials, the seizure of correspondence is carried out in agreement with the investigator and the prosecutor's

office representative supervising the investigation. The heads of postal and telegraph institutions must allow these officials to inspect and seize correspondence immediately upon such a request, without first obtaining permission from their chief local authority, but they must report each case of such detention or seizure of correspondence. I inform you of this for your knowledge and guidance.”

For this reason, there were often complaints in Semirechye about opened letters, delays, or disappearances in postal and telegraph organizations, meaning the failure of correspondence to reach the recipient. The recipient had no way to get a correct response. Often, the opening of correspondence occurred at the points of dispatch or receipt (CSA RK. F. 199. Op. 1. D. 7. L. 65–65ob.).

A clear example of perustration in the Turkestan region involved the examination and secret forwarding of correspondence addressed to Prince Nikolai Konstantinovich, his wife, and their servants by postal and telegraph office employees to the appropriate authorities. Primarily, letters sent to or related to locations in the Syrdarya region were subject to surveillance. In 1891, a circular was sent to the Turkestan postal and telegraph offices and branches regarding the prince's correspondence, which referenced specific locations such as the “Iskander Estat” in Tashkent and the “Bukhara Canal in the Hungry Steppe”. The circular stated: “All written correspondence, regardless of how it is received at the institution, whether by mail, personal delivery, or dropped into a mailbox, and regardless of who it is from, whether third parties or individuals on the list – if it is addressed to Grand Duke Nikolai Konstantinovich or to individuals in his service, must be sent to the Head of the Tashkent office as specified in the circular. Only correspondence from His Majesty or his servants to third parties not listed in the circular should be forwarded to the Department of Police” (CSA RK. F. 194. Op. 1. D. 34. L. 19–20).

In conclusion, it can be assumed that during the period under study in the Semirechye region, there were no “Black Cabinets” (special rooms for perustration), and postal and telegraph office employees did not directly conduct perustration. Instead, the detection of suspicious correspondence among the local population was the responsibility of volost rulers and clerks.

#### **How did state authorities use postal and telegraph offices?**

The state made efforts to keep the practice of perustration (the secret interception and inspection of letters) confidential, aiming to maintain the public's trust in postal and telegraph services and their employees. However, local authorities, which mainly include police, gendarmerie, military, and other agencies, read letters in routine, leading to a decline in public trust in the postal system. As a result, by the early 19th century, perustration had become a key tool for political investigation and surveillance (Izmozik, 2023: 68-71).

In the mid-XVIII century, all letters arriving from Petersburg were delivered directly to the local post office, while others underwent censorship. The local post office made copies and extracts from these letters, summarized them, and sent them to the governors-general. The Chief Director of Posts forwarded the most important letters to convey information to the emperor. In the XIX century, incoming correspondence was opened, read, and summarized, with notes taken and photos made to identify hidden “chemical” texts, followed by decryption if the text was encoded. The letters were then resealed in their envelopes and sent to the post office for delivery. In rare cases, letters were detained and confiscated, with a note made on the extract indicating the letter's detention pending special instructions. All of this required close coordination with the Special Department of the Police (Izmozik, 2023: 57, 130).

The chief censor compiled an annual report for the Minister of Internal Affairs based on the gathered information, including materials from censorship. Similarly, local government agencies submitted reports to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In the context of the Semirechye region, the issues covered included the settlement of migrants from Russia on Kazakh lands, the 1905 revolution, Russia's participation in World War I in 1914, public opinions on these events, and the mobilization of Kazakhs for labour in 1916. The governor of the Semirechye region regularly provided monthly and annual reports to the police department on public sentiments, compiling information on the political attitudes of local Muslim Kazakhs and Christian Russians in response to unfolding events.

The department also established individual surveillance and monitored correspondence. Such political events were reflected in the governor's reports on “public sentiments”, and the military governor of the Semirechye region noted in a 1915 report that rumors were circulating among the public about the possibility of neutral China participating in the war against Russia. Therefore, the department placed foreign nationals entering the country under surveillance as a precaution. Two Chinese nationals, posing as traders, were reported to be gathering information about troop numbers and routes to Lepsinsk and Verny. Their correspondence uncovered their connections with the Tarbagatay governor, leading to their apprehension. A message was sent to the Semipalatinsk investigation point (CSA RK. F. 2300. Op. 8. D. 15. L. 16–16ob.).

The information gathered by the Special Department also formed the basis for regular reports to the emperor. These reports, known as the “Tsar's Leaflet” (Tsarskii Listok), contained details about revolutionary activities, opposition groups, incidents, riots, and deaths. The summaries titled “Summary of Noteworthy Information from the Police Department”, which were read by the emperor and his close advisors, ranged from 5 to 600 pages. In the 1890s, these reports were prepared monthly; by 1902, they were produced biweekly and then weekly. Unlike reports from the Minister of Internal Affairs, these summaries did not include assessments of the political situation or suggest broader counter-strategies to provocations.

The police were not mentioned directly, and the information was framed as data collected through perлуstration and from secret informants (Daly, 1998: 105-106).

The Okhrannaya Politsiya frequently relied on the work of these “Black Offices” to identify criminal groups, often uncovering crucial evidence about their communications. Various government departments circulated copies of intercepted letters. For example, perлуstration uncovered the attempted assassination of Alexander III by members of “Narodnaya Volya” on March 1, 1887, leading to the identification and punishment of the conspirators. This demonstrates that perлуstration played a supplementary role in the state's broader security measures (Daly, 1998). Similarly, under imperial practices, political radicals were allowed to remain free until they committed an act of violence or crime. The secret police often remained in the shadows, while the gendarmerie represented the state's political authority until 1917. The secret police had opportunities to hone their craft due to the activities of certain highly active individuals and groups who were masters of conspiracy.

Additionally, military agencies, alongside police departments, were involved in reading letters. The General Staff received copies of letters and extracts directly from St Petersburg. From there, they were forwarded to the emperor or other recipients (Izmozik, 2023: 75). Thus, during the period of the Russian Empire, postal and telegraph services became an important tool of state control and political surveillance. Despite their outward neutrality, they were actively used for covert monitoring, which undermined the public's trust in the communication system.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the information gathered through covert surveillance by prerevolutionary special institutions encompassed nearly all spheres of life within the late imperial state. Observation was therefore significant not merely because it produced extensive materials on public opinion or moral attitudes but because it reflected the state's growing concern with public sentiment. At its core, observation sought to preserve an officially constructed narrative of reality and to prevent the penetration of information considered harmful into the minds and consciousness of the population. Maintaining control over the circulation of ideas in a rapidly changing world required sustained and considerable effort from the imperial authorities.

For this purpose, postal and telegraph workers were compelled to participate indirectly in monitoring society in addition to fulfilling their primary communication duties. At the same time, the institutionalisation of censorship and military scrutiny contributed to the emergence of distrust among the local population. These mechanisms were paradoxically designed to preserve public confidence in communication institutions and their personnel, while covert surveillance was conducted through parallel administrative and security channels. Specialists responsible for censorship in Semirechye identified correspondence deemed sensitive and ensured its timely transmission to the appropriate state bodies.

Consequently, imperial officials were supplied with information concerning diverse aspects of social and political life. Analysis of correspondence intercepted at the end of 1916 reveals that institutional assessments, in many respects, anticipated the forthcoming revolutionary upheavals. Through censorship mechanisms, the police registered foreign nationals and closely monitored their activities. However, despite assisting the government in countering social unrest and revolutionary organizations, the police apparatus proved incapable of preventing large-scale social upheavals or accurately forecasting their scope. The failure of the surveillance and policing system to maintain imperial stability became evident during the events of 1905, when the regime retained elite support only through substantial political concessions and ultimately relied on military force to suppress popular unrest.

Finally, it can be assumed that during the period under study in the Semirechye region, there were no “Black Cabinets” (specialised facilities for perлуstration), and postal and telegraph employees did not directly engage in the opening and reading of correspondence. Instead, the identification of suspicious letters among the local population was largely delegated to volost rulers and their clerks, who functioned as key intermediaries within the system of local surveillance.

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