

Transportation in Prokudin-Gorskii's Imperial Photo-Survey

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History 124: Russia: A Multinational Empire

October 17, 2024

In the early 20th century, photographer and chemist Sergei Prokudin-Gorskii traveled the Russian Empire, documenting daily life under the “personal approval of Tsar Nicholas II.”¹ One of the many aspects of the empire Prokudin-Gorskii photographed was transportation, from government-owned steamships and industrial spur lines to Central Asian camel caravans. His ultimate goal was to display the diversity and scale of the empire in a “conformation of [its] existence and a justification of its continued existence.”² Prokudin-Gorskii’s Russian photo survey deliberately illustrates the diversity of geography and peoples in the empire and the continued contrast between traditional and modern machines.

Boats were a major trade facilitator, especially after the incorporation of Black Sea territories in the late 18th century and the rise of steamships. Due to Russia’s numerous rivers, boats served the empire’s local and international trade purposes. Their relevance continued into the early 20th century despite the rise of railroads. In 1909, Prokudin-Gorskii documented the continued use and variation of traditional boats in Russia’s smaller, more rural regions.³ His photo titled “Kraeshka boat yard. [Russian Empire]” was taken from the shore of Lake Onega in Northern European Russia, depicting small docks and boats on the outskirts of a small town.⁴ There are no people pictured in the photograph, but there are hints of daily life through barrels waiting on one of the larger docks in the center of the photo and the lumber stockpile just behind them on the shore.⁵ Most eye-catching is the variety of boats highlighted in this shot: the right

¹ Reischl, Katherine M. H. “Imperial Color in the Present Tense: The Photography of Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky,” in *Picturing Russian Empire*, edited by Valeria A. Kivelson, Sergei Kozlov, and Joan Neuberger, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 273.

² Reischl, “Imperial Color in the Present Tense: The Photography of Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky,” 271.

³ Library of Congress. “Kareshka Boat Yard. [Russian Empire],” *Prokudin-Gorskii Collection*. Accessed October 13, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/prok/item/2018678859/>.

⁴ Library of Congress, “Kareshka Boat Yard. [Russian Empire].”

⁵ Library of Congress, “Kareshka Boat Yard. [Russian Empire].”

side of the image's foreground features a small canoe juxtaposed by a much larger, decoratively painted steamship just behind.⁶ The left side of the image first features a small tugboat and then two slightly obscured sailboats.⁷ The significance of this variety lies in the documentation of older boat styles (canoes and sailboats) used at the same time and area as modern steamboats. Some of this variation may be due to the relative recency of steamboats in the empire. Major river ports like Tyumen in Western Siberia did not receive steamships until 1844, meaning small ports like those on Lake Onega likely did not receive steam vessels for several decades.⁸ While the slow spread of steamships contributed to the continued use of smaller boats, it also had to do with the specialties of each vessel. Steamboats were best suited for long-distance trade and transportation, whereas smaller boats facilitated fishing, local travel, and trade.

Prokudin-Gorskii captured the regime's interest in the long-distance capabilities of steamships through his 1912 photo "Steamer Tiumen of the Ministry of Communication and Transportation." The majority of the landscape is sparse, with minimal vegetation and no signs of human habitation besides two mooring lines in the foreground, indicating a vessel out of frame to the right and a small unidentifiable structure on the far riverbank.⁹ This bareness highlights a steamship and its crew in the center of the shot. The ship appears cleanly painted beige, black, and red with a silver relief on the bow.¹⁰ The ship's crew all posed for the image spread out on both levels of the vessel, facing the camera and in full uniform.¹¹ There are a few

⁶ Library of Congress, "Kareshka Boat Yard. [Russian Empire]."

⁷ Library of Congress, "Kareshka Boat Yard. [Russian Empire]."

⁸ Korandei, Fedor. "Siberian Travelogues: Images of Asiatic Russia During the Transport Revolution (1860s-1890s)," in *Picturing Russian Empire*, edited by Valeria A. Kivelson, Sergei Kozlov, and Joan Neuberger, (Oxford University Press, 2011), 215.

⁹ Library of Congress. "Steamer Tiumen of the Ministry of Communication and Transportation," *Prokudin-Gorskii Collection*. Accessed October 13, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/prok/item/2018681100/>.

¹⁰ Library of Congress, "Steamer Tiumen of the Ministry of Communication and Transportation."

¹¹ Library of Congress, "Steamer Tiumen of the Ministry of Communication and Transportation."

people who seem to be passengers on the decks, including one woman, all well-dressed and facing the camera.¹² The purchase and use of a steamship with the funds for a full crew and decoration in this photo illustrate the priority of steamboats to the Ministry of Communication and Transportation and, thus, their importance to the Empire. Decades prior, in the late 1850s, Nikolai Ignatiev documented the Empire's attention to ships at large when he expressed "the long range goal" of the regime "to find the best independent route to India via the Syr Darya and Amu Darya."¹³ The focus on establishing ship trade networks heading into the late 19th century expresses the Empire's reliance on both ships and their ability to facilitate Colonial expansion into Central Asia.

The Russian government paid similar attention to the development and expansion of railways in the second half of the 19th century. In 1857, "The Decree on Railways" laid out plans for the empire's rail system, acknowledging that rail lines had "become a national need and a common and insistent desire" of the empire.¹⁴ This "desire" comes across in Prokudin-Gorskii's many photographs of trains and railways. In his 1915 photograph, "Railroad Dam at the Lizham Station" the struggles of railway expansion and maintenance become clear. The photo captures a rail line and station built on top of a dam with a sailboat moored to the left. A dam as the base for the rails is one of the few options available when laying lines across water. Other options were to build a bridge or extend the line around the water source; both of these solutions required more time and materials to construct, which would add considerable cost. This was a primary concern

¹² Libraray of Congress, "Steamer Tiumen of the Ministry of Communication and Transportation."

¹³ "Nikolai Ignatiev: Russia's Agenda in Central Asia," in *Islamic Central Asia: An Anthology of Historical Sources*, edited by Scott C. Levi and Ron Sela, (Indiana University Press, 2010), 297.

¹⁴ "The Decree on Railways, January 26, 1857," in *A Source Book for Russian History from Early Times to 1917*, Vol. 3: *Peter the Great to Nicholas I*, edited by George Vernadsky, (Yale University Press, 1972), 607.

for those in opposition to the railways, especially due to the empire's many lakes and rivers.¹⁵ Concerning this, many felt the railroad would be redundant because so much trade and transport was possible by ship along these extensive waterways.¹⁶ The empire developed a rail system despite these concerns due to Western European pressure and the increased efficiency the railroads offered. At this time, Russia was acutely aware of competition with the British and wanted to expand imperial land and resources "to force [Great Britain] to value [Russian] friendship."¹⁷ Judgment from Britain on the slow adoption of the railroad and a desire to compete in the global arena certainly motivated the Russian government to invest in railways.¹⁸ Efficiency became more apparent as railroads opened in the empire.

Prokudin-Gorskii documents the benefits of varied modes of transportation, both traditional and modern, in several of his photographs. In the same period, Prokudin-Gorskii captured the transport of sacks, likely filled with "grain or cotton," at a warehouse on a spur line and on the backs of a camel in Central Asia.¹⁹ These photos compare the benefits and drawbacks of both types of transportation and variations in Prokudin-Gorskii's photographic style. The industrial photo, "Laborers Loading Sacks onto Railway at Factory Warehouse," depicts several aspects of the operation from a view inside the warehouse: a laden short-distance railcar and a collection of sacks ready for loading.²⁰ All workers wear similar clothes, though two posed alone

¹⁵ Herlihy, Patricia. "Odessa: Staple Trade and Urbanization in New Russia," in *Odessa Recollected: The Port and the People*, (Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University and Academic Studies Press, 2018), 173.

¹⁶ Herlihy, Patricia. "Odessa: Staple Trade and Urbanization in New Russia," in *Odessa Recollected: The Port and the People*, (Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University and Academic Studies Press, 2018), 173.

¹⁷ "Nikolai Ignatiev: Russia's Agenda in Central Asia," 296.

¹⁸ Herlihy, Patricia. "Odessa: Staple Trade and Urbanization in New Russia," 174.

¹⁹ Library of Congress. "Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia," *Prokudin-Gorskii Collection*. Accessed October 13, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/prok/item/2018681297/>; Library of Congress. "Laborers Loading Sacks onto Railway at Factory Warehouse," *Prokudin-Gorskii Collection*. Accessed October 13, 2024, <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/prok/item/2018681232/>.

²⁰ Library of Congress, "Laborers Loading Sacks onto Railway at Factory Warehouse."

are in darker clothing and appear male.²¹ The dark clothing also draws the eye to the two men because of the lightness of the beige and pale blue background.²² The understated men seem to be in conversation; none of the workers are posed as if at work, but evidence of their job hangs over the scene.²³ A worker, obscured by the shadow of the warehouse interior, appears to be approaching the other men, possibly to begin an activity. One of the men in the conversation has his hand on a dolly, and the man next to the railcar stands on the opposite side of the car from the pull line.²⁴ The railcar itself appears fully loaded and ready for transport to a station, one of many industrial connections on the empire's railroad network, holding at least twelve large sacks — much of Russia's modern trade revolved around these industrial rail systems.²⁵

Before the rise of railroads, large shipments relied on animal power. In many areas lacking railways or waterways, this mode of transportation remained prevalent into the 20th century. Prokudin-Gorskii's "Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia" depicts a young man posed next to a camel in a loading yard full of sacks but otherwise clear of people and camels.²⁶ On the very right edge of the portrait is a figure sitting on a sack, implying more people are present at the location but out of frame.²⁷ The man appears dressed explicitly for the photo in traditional bright red robes and pants, a patterned scarf, and a black hat —noticeably clear of grime despite the loose dirt he kneels on.²⁸ His boots

²¹ Library of Congress, "Laborers Loading Sacks onto Railway at Factory Warehouse."

²² Library of Congress, "Laborers Loading Sacks onto Railway at Factory Warehouse."

²³ Library of Congress, "Laborers Loading Sacks onto Railway at Factory Warehouse."

²⁴ Library of Congress, "Laborers Loading Sacks onto Railway at Factory Warehouse."

²⁵ Library of Congress, "Laborers Loading Sacks onto Railway at Factory Warehouse."

²⁶ Library of Congress, "Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia."

²⁷ Library of Congress, "Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia."

²⁸ Library of Congress, "Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia."

are the exception; they are caked in dirt, suggesting he owns only one pair.²⁹ The rareness of cameras in Central Asia at the turn of the century comes across in the subject's desire to dress up, revealing, through that dress, a unique culture that Prokudin-Gorskii highlights as an aspect of Russia's diversity. The man kneels on one knee parallel to the camera, his torso and head facing the camera, and his head is relatively level with the kneeling camel beside him.³⁰ The camel carries two sacks and, unlike the man, wears no decoration. It has back support and a chain halter held by the man, and its head faces the camera.³¹ The chain in hands, loaded camel, and one-legged kneel suggest action as though the man and camel will soon stand and begin transporting the sacks. However, the lack of activity in the background of the shot and obvious staging takes away from the implications of the movement.³²

Though both images show large quantities of sacks ready for transport, the difference in efficiency is obvious. The warehouse railcar holds approximately six times as many sacks as one camel and would save time as it is already on the train track, whereas, even for water trade, a camel or wagon would have a slow trek to port and transport fewer goods. This productivity was a great asset to the empire, and investment in the railroad continued; by "1905, it was already possible to get from [...] the Atlantic Ocean to [...] the Pacific Ocean" and "to reach the remotest parts of Russian Asia" by railroad.³³ Despite the eventual scope of the Russian railways,

²⁹ Library of Congress, "Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia."

³⁰ Library of Congress, "Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia."

³¹ Library of Congress, "Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia."

³² Library of Congress, "Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia."

³³ Korandei, Fedor. "Siberian Travelogues: Images of Asiatic Russia During the Transport Revolution (1860s-1890s)," 215.

camels “remained the most common means of transporting” goods through Central Asia.”³⁴

While railways reached many parts of Central Asia, traveling between depots or small towns required camels to navigate the desert.

The story of transportation in Prokudin-Gorskii’s Russian survey showcases the need and use of a diverse means of transportation and the contrast between tradition and modernity. From rural towns with traditional sailboats to steamships on major waterways and trains to camel caravans, the empire’s regional wealth and geography shaped its transportation and trade. The forces behind modern transportation were a mix of Western political pressure and trade necessity, as the Russian empire sought to compete on the world stage. Prokudin-Gorskii captured the empire’s expansiveness by highlighting its size, success, and multiethnic makeup. His photos of transportation illustrate the scale of these claims through the diversity of posed subjects, landscapes, and clothing. He showcases success through the large quantities of goods and well-kept uniforms. In this way, Prokudin-Gorskii successfully validates the Russian Empire’s position as a global power.

³⁴ Library of Congress, “Turkmen man Posing with Camel Loaded with Sacks, Probably of Grain or Cotton, Central Asia.”

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