

# The Tea Road: Tea Smuggling In Russian Empire

Mamatova M. B.<sup>1</sup>, Ergasheva Yu. A.<sup>2</sup>, Muminova G. E.<sup>3</sup>, Karimova N. I.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of History of Uzbekistan, Karshi state university, Karshi, Uzbekistan

<sup>2</sup>Department of Social Science and Humanities, Karshi state technical university, Karshi, Uzbekistan

<sup>3</sup>Department of World History, Karshi state university, Karshi, Uzbekistan

<sup>4</sup>Department of World History, Jizakh pedagogical state university, Jizakh, Uzbekistan

maxfuzamamatova@gmail.com; yuae63@gmail.com; gmuminova1969@gmail.com;

nargiz\_82\_88@mail.ru

\*Corresponding Author: maxfuzamamatova@gmail.com

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**Abstract**– The article looks at how tea was smuggled out of the Russian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, how it got into Kiyakhta and how it got into the country along the European and Asian borders, in countries such as England, Finland, Poland, Austria, Moldova, Germany, China and India.

The spread of smuggling of Kiakhta and Cantonese teas in the country is noted with the fact that they were cheaper than legal tea and therefore in great demand among the inhabitants of the empire. Following the legalisation of Cantonese tea within the empire, the trade in Kiakhta tea began to decline.

This article discusses the different types and methods of tea smuggling that took place in the Russian Empire. It also looks at a government decree that was put in place to try and stop this smuggling, and how the banderolization system was then introduced, with the impact this had on the smuggling trade being a key part of the article.

Finally, it should be noted that the government increased customs revenues with a view to reducing tea smuggling in the country.

**Keywords**– Cantonese tea, Kiakhta tea, tea packaging, tea smuggling.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Russian Empire's inhabitants were unaware of tea and its consumption until the 17th century. It was only in 1618 that Chinese ambassadors presented Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich Romanov with several boxes of fine tea. However, the Russians did not drink it, dismissing it as "dried Chinese grass". It was not until 1638 that Ambassador Vasily Starkov first brought tea to Russia as a gift, having received it from the western Mongolian ruler [1]. The Tsar and the boyars liked the tea, and by 1674 it was being sold on the Moscow market. In 1679 and 1727, the first trade agreements were concluded for the supply of tea to the Russian Empire.

This article draws on archival materials and written sources on the tea trade of the Russian Empire to analyse data on the smuggling of black and green teas from European and Asian countries in the 19th century. It also looks at the development of tea smuggling, the impact of Cantonese tea smuggling on the tea trade of the empire, and types of tea smuggling. The harmful effects of tea smuggling on the Russian Empire's trade, the government's anti-smuggling measures, and the introduction of the tea banderolisation system are also examined.

Further materials on tea smuggling during this period can be found in the I-560 collection at the Russian State Historical Archive in St. Petersburg, Russia. Issues surrounding tea smuggling are examined in the works of I.P. Sakharov [11], N. Krit [5]-[6], I.A. Noskov [10], D. Prozorovsky [2], D.I. Stakheev [4], A.P. Subbotin [3], A. Gubarevich-Rodobilsky [12]-[13], M.M. Zenzinov [14], M.E. Sinyukov [15] and William H.Ukers [16]. These works were published in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, and are considered the basis for further research in this field. Among modern researchers, V.V. Pokhlebin [1], I.A. Sokolov [18], K.A. Abdrakhmanov [19], M.B. Mamatova [20] and A.M. Khaliullin [7] are notable for their work on the history of the tea trade in the Russian Empire.

## II. RESEARCH METODOLOGY

The following methods were used when revealing the research topic: systematic (when studying historical sources and the historiography of the issue); objective (when studying and analysing archival documents); chronological (when demonstrating the gradual growth of tea smuggling); actualisation (when determining

the consequences of tea smuggling); comparison (when analysing static data); and typological methods (when applying approaches used to solve problems).

### III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Developments in Tea Smuggling

Since the 18th century, tea has been imported into the Russian Empire from China via Siberia, through the taiga and then via Kiakhta, bypassing customs. By the 20th year of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, smuggling in Kiakhta had become more widespread [2]. Smuggling was not considered a crime in Kiakhta, and smugglers were not even called thieves [3]. In order to eliminate tea smuggling in the country, import was prohibited by any other means. Initially, tea smuggling penetrated through Danzig (Gdańsk, Poland) along the Vistula River into the Kingdom of Poland, and through Austria and Moldavia into the Bessarabian region (Ukraine, Moldova). Then, it intensified constantly, spreading to the western provinces [4]. In the 1850s, smuggling reached its peak along the south-western border and through the Ostsee provinces (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), which began importing large quantities through Hamburg and Leipzig to the western provinces. Some of this tea was confiscated and sold in Moscow by customs [2]. As sea delivery became cheaper and prices outside Russia decreased, the benefits of smuggling increased. Despite all the government's measures, smuggled tea poured out of the country by the river.

As S. P. Subbotin notes, 'At the same time, tea is a very convenient object for smuggling because, despite its small weight, it has a relatively high price, it is very portable, and it can be scattered in all kinds of rooms' [2].

According to N. Crete, tea smuggling along the European border increased over the years and reached a high level (8,167 poods) in 1855 during the period 1848–1863 [5]. After reaching a second peak of 7,000 poods in 1858, tea smuggling fell to 1,000 poods in 1863 (see Fig. 1).

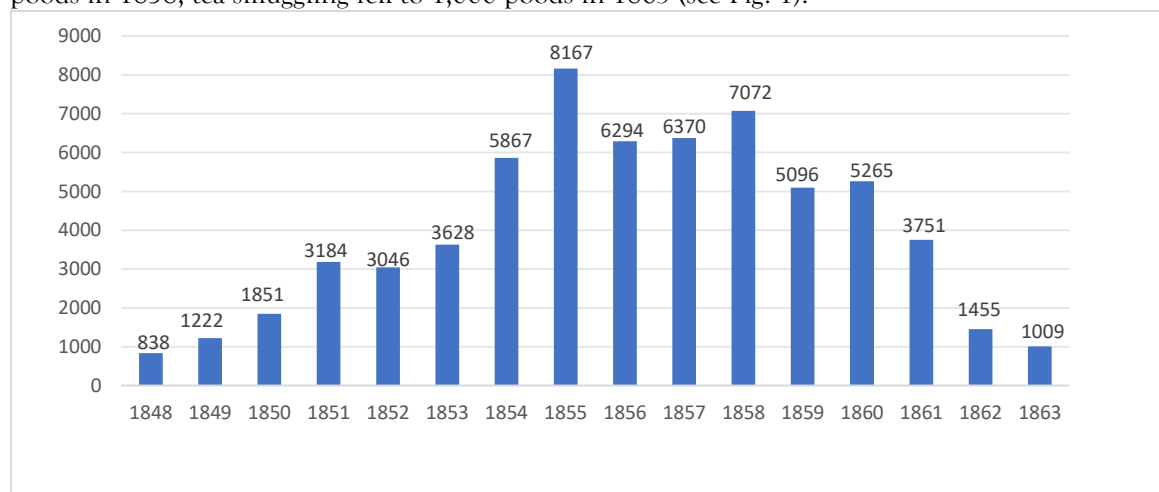


Fig. 1. Smuggling tea across European-style borders [5]

The Kakhtin smugglers, who bought tea from the Chinese on credit tickets, overpaid by 2 to 5 p. ser. for each place of baih tea, compared to the legal price; in addition, the smuggling expenses extended to 15 to 17 p. ser. for each place of baih tea and about 4 p. ser. for each place of brick tea. Consequently, consumers in the Transbaikal region paid 17–22 kopecks more per place of smuggled baih tea and 4 kopecks more per place of brick tea than they do now that this region has been granted the right to duty-free trade. This reduction in cost will inevitably increase tea consumption in the Transbaikal region, consequently developing the tea trade there. This trade will probably become the property of many small capitalists, increasing the region's prosperity [6].

According to I. A. Sokolov, around 30% of tea imported into the Russian Empire was done so illegally. [3] The main reason for the high demand for smuggled tea was that it was cheaper than legally imported tea. [7] It should be noted that, at that time, a box of tea was subject to a duty of between 34 and 37 rubles in silver, while the tea itself sometimes cost no more than 32 rubles [4].

#### B. Smuggling Cantonese Tea

Tea brought through Kiakhta was known as Kiakhta tea. Apart from this, tea from Chinese factories was exported by sea rather than overland. This tea from the Chinese market was taken to the coastal city of

Guangzhou, from where it was transported by sea to Europe. This is why it was called Canton tea.

The appearance of Canton tea in the trade arena, coupled with its affordability in England, made smuggling it into Russia highly profitable. The impetus for smuggling came in 1822 with the prohibition of tea imports to Europe. Due to the significant difference in the price of tea in the Russian Empire compared to other European countries, and the ban on importing tea from Europe by sea or overland, there was clandestine importation of Cantonese tea into Russia through the western land border.

Until the mid-19th century, only tea from Kiakhta was used in Russia. Cantonese tea was smuggled in. In 1862, the import of Cantonese tea was permitted. From that time, the Russian trade in Kiakhta began to decline. This can be explained by the fact that tea took 205 days to reach Kiakhta by road, whereas Cantonese tea took only 68 days. Carriage of one pound of tea cost 56 kopecks to Moscow, whereas carriage of Cantonese tea cost 18 kopecks for the same distance [8]. At the beginning of the 1860s, Cantonese tea was imported in three main ways: 1) from the west, via the Prussian border and Poland; 2) from the north, via Finland; and 3) from the south-west, via the Austrian border and across the Danube [3]. From the 1870s and 1880s, Cantonese tea was imported on a large scale. across the western border [3].

Following the removal of the Polish border, smuggling spread to the central provinces and cities of the Russian Empire to such an extent that it accounted for more than two-thirds of the entire state. According to I. Sakharov's data, the success of smuggling was promoted by the high value of tea exchanged at Kiakhta, which was delivered by land from Fuchan to Moscow, compared to smuggled tea. It was also promoted by the considerable consumption of tea in Russia. The spread and final scale of smuggling was promoted by the absence of internal supervision of the retail tea trade, where tea was sold without complying with general customs rules, in arbitrarily poured cartouches without any customs or other distinctive mark. According to the established trade regulations, all items exported from abroad must retain their customs stamps until they are sold to consumers; otherwise, they are confiscated.

#### C. Types of Smuggling

If we consider tea smuggling along the borders of the Russian Empire, we can identify the following routes:

a) Along the European border:

- 1) From the west, through Prussia and Poland.
- 2) From the north, through Finland.
- 3) From the south-west, through the Austrian border and across the Danube.
- 4) Through Austria and Moldavia.
- 5) Through Leipzig and Hamburg.

b) The Asiatic frontier:

- 1) Kyakhty
- 2) Maimachen
- 3) Mongolia
- 4) The Caucasus

In terms of size, there were three types of tea smuggling:

- 1) Retail: small-scale smuggling, where tea was carried by sovoshniki (who checked batches of tea coming from China to Kiakhta, piercing the cibik with a savy to extract a certain amount of tea) and various local residents to Troitskosavsk. From there, it was distributed among the surrounding villages so that the border regions could enjoy cheap tea.
- 2) Large-scale wholesale smuggling, carried out by specialised individuals on good horses, transporting 5-10 cases at a time, and sometimes by wagon.
- 3) The third type involved large consignments of up to 200 cases, which were sent secretly from Maimachin deep into the Mongolian steppe, where leather and seals were procured.

In his monograph, D.I. Stakheev writes about the methods of tea smuggling. He states that sometimes the tea belonged not to the smugglers themselves, but to merchants who had contracted them to transport their goods via roundabout routes to avoid customs checks. In this case, the smugglers acted honourably and rarely deceived their clients. However, if the tea fell into the hands of the authorities during transport, the owner lost everything [4].

Smugglers also pursued each other. It happened that a man, going his way along the road and not expecting to find anything, suddenly noticed a cart carrying tea or other contraband. He spurred his horse and, if its run was strong enough, sometimes managed to get the goods. However, not everyone is capable

of such a daring chase because you could lose your life in the process. There were sometimes such fierce battles between border guards and smugglers that two or three people were left dead on the battlefield [4]. A lot of tea was brought to Irkutsk in boxes with no seals. This crude smuggling, as mentioned above, is the work of small-time smugglers. Though, before, there was no customs office in Irkutsk and nobody paid attention to tea wagons passing through the city, small industrialists engaged in tea smuggling conducted their business cautiously. Having received the crates without customs stamps, firstly, they brought them into the city in the evening. Secondly, as soon as the tea was brought into their flat, the Irkutsk tea smugglers immediately poured it from the crates into mice. The tea boards and reeds were burnt and the leather was taken to a familiar saddler that night. This way, any traces of the smuggling business disappeared, and the tea in sacks could be sold openly under the guise of 'owl tea' (samples taken from the corners of the boxes) [4].

As A. P. Subbotin notes, tea could be imported not only through large customs houses, but also through small outposts. Sometimes only a small amount was presented for payment, and the rest went through the 'green customs', sometimes with the favourable assistance of customs officials [Subbotin, 581]. Also, cheap Indian tea was secretly imported through Persia along the Caucasian border in canvas sacks, which gave it an extraneous odour. Sometimes, they managed to smuggle half of the tea through customs for free. For this purpose, two boxes or four half-boxes were stacked into one big box, so that instead of two boxes, there was one [3].

Also for smuggling by sea, British and American skippers were permitted to include one and a half pounds of tea in the provisions of each ship. However, it had become customary on many English ships to replace strong drinks with tea. According to the Arkhangelsk customs files, during navigation from 1840 to 1845, 20 British ships brought more than 1 pood (14.5 ft) of tea as ship's provisions, and all smuggled tea exceeding the permitted amount was subject to confiscation [9] (see Pic. 1).

According to N. Krita, in order to conceal the smuggled tea, , smugglers would sometimes buy empty cibiks from under the Kiakhta tea for a lot of money. The customs seals were kept on these, and the smugglers would pour Cantonese tea into them. They would then sell this tea under the name of Kiakhta tea without fear. Alternatively, they would scatter the smuggled tea into pounds, half-pounds and quarters. They would then put it into cartouches with false seals and labels of famous St. Petersburg and Moscow tea merchants [5].

#### D. The Harmful Effects of Smuggling

The initial impact of tea smuggling was evident in the Kiakhta trade through the sale of tea at the Nizhny Novgorod Fair in 1847. Russian teas were sold at a heavy loss; for example, flower tea, which cost 50–70 r. ser. without duty, was sold for 20–32 r. per place [I. A. Noskov, 8]. They then began to consider different measures, the first of which was to try to reduce the cost of tea at source from the Chinese. When they returned from the fair in Kiakhta and learnt that the Chinese had procured almost double the amount of tea for Russia, the merchants increased their prices by 50% and, if possible, maintained these prices. Consequently, in 1848, teas were sold for 30 rubles per grey instead of 50. They were sent to the fair in large quantities and were therefore sold cheaply. A large quantity of them were sold for 115 rubles per place, whereas previously they had been sold for between 140 and 160 rubles. This reduced price temporarily stopped or reduced smuggling. However, this prosperity turned out to be short-lived [10]. From 1849, smuggling first affected internal Russian trade and then the Kiakhta trade, causing disorder. The amount of tea imported into Russia through smuggling can be determined by comparing its import with consumption.

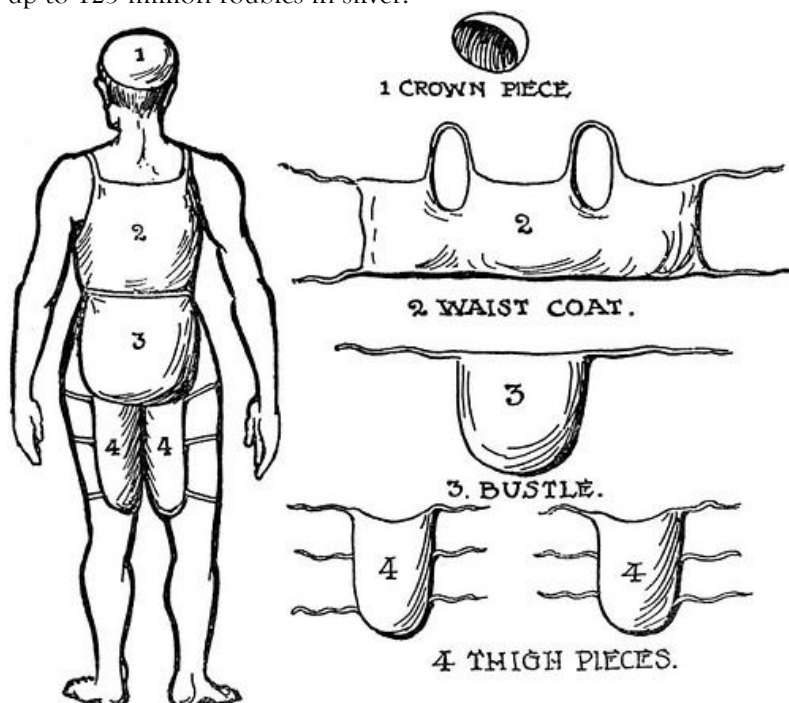
Years	Tea exported through Kyakhte (in pounds)	Proportion of previous year's consumption	Annual increase	Total	Shortage of imports
1849	6.583.480	10.037.120	440.000	10.477.120	3.893.640
1850	8.431.160	10.477.120	440.000	10.917.120	2.484.960
1851	9.573.760	10.917.120	440.000	11.357.120	1.793.360
1852	9.716.040	11.357.120	440.000	11.797.120	2.081.080
1853	3.208.060	11.791.120	440.000	12.237.120	9.029.060
1854	5.774.840	12.237.120	440.000	12.677.120	6.902.280
1855	5.974.780	12.677.120	440.000	13.117.120	7.210.340

Total for 7 years	49,262,120. or 7,037,446 p. per year on average.			82.479.840	33.217.720
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Table. 1. Exported tea through Kyakhthe from 1849 to 1855 (in pounds) [11].

As I. P. Sakharov notes, 10,037,120 pounds of tea were brought through Kiakhtha in 1848. The gradual increase in consumption, which rose by 10,000 pounds per year over 10 years (1839–1848), leads to the following conclusion: that during the last seven years (1849–1855), 82,000,000 pounds of tea would have been needed for consumption in Russia 479,840 pounds. Meanwhile, only 49,262,120 pounds were exported during this period, meaning that more than 33,000,000 pounds of tea were replaced by contraband (see Table 1)

Based on this very limited figure of under-delivery alone, it appears that the smuggling of Canton tea caused damage to Russian interests to the value of more than 47 million roubles in silver over seven years (from 1849 to 1855). If this calculation is based on an estimate of Russian tea consumption by population, the total disadvantage to Russia's commercial and financial interests during these seven years amounts to up to 123 million roubles in silver.



Pic. 1. Boatmen's tea smuggled ashore From E. Keble Chatterton, *King's Cutters and Smugglers, 1700-1855*, 1912, p. 213. [17]

#### E. Measures Against Tea Smuggling

The government's measures, which were intended to control the tea trade, focused primarily on combatting smuggling. As early as 1836, in order to combat smuggling, it was decreed that Kiakhtha teas were to be sent to the western border provinces only in the original Kiakhtha packaging, bearing the Kiakhtha customs seals. If the packaging was different, the teas would be transferred to Moscow or St. Petersburg customs, who would impose their own seals. Teas sold without observing these rules would be confiscated [3].

As smuggling spread throughout the inner provinces of the Russian Empire, merchants involved in the Kiakhtha trade complained about the harm caused to the regular tea trade [5]. Various proposals arose to counteract this, namely:

- 1) In 1843, a proposal was made to prohibit small traders in the western provinces from selling tea in open premises, but no further action was taken.
- 2) In the same year, the merchants presented a draft of rules about the establishment of a private agency for the prosecution of tea smuggling along the western borders of the Empire and within it, to be funded

by the merchants. Although the project was approved, it remained unimplemented due to the merchants' own actions.

3) In 1844, it was proposed that an order be issued stipulating that tea exchanged at Kiakhta should only be sold within the Empire in packages. However, these proposals had no consequences due to the opinion of the main tea merchants in Moscow, who said that imposing packages on tea would completely restrict the tea trade, reducing sales by at least half. They also said that tea would lose its distinctive aroma when weighed, meaning consumers would lose the opportunity to recognise the quality of the tea they were buying, and some merchants would be tempted to sell lower grades of tea as higher grades. In 1845, this opinion was repeated by Kiakhta tea merchants living in Moscow.

4) In 1844, it was proposed that wholesalers should sell tea only in chibiks to tea shop owners, who would then sell it to consumers in caps covered with a banderole. This proposal was deemed impractical.

5) In 1845, given the popularity of Cantonese tea in the Kingdom of Poland and the western provinces rather than Kiakhta tea, it was proposed that the banderole system be applied to the retail sale of tea in these regions. Kiakhta and Moscow-based tea merchants responded to this proposal in the same way.

6) In 1845, the commissions for the discovery and investigation of abuses in the tea trade in St. Petersburg and Moscow decided to complicate the sale of Cantonese tea in the Kingdom of Poland, Finland, Courland, the western provinces and the Bessarabia region by decreeing the following:

a) Chinese tea was to be sent to these places only after being weighed in pounds and half pounds under the firms of merchants, with an indication of the quality and price of the tea under the seals of the St. Petersburg and Moscow Customs. The Customs officials must verify the quality of the tea by opening several boxes when applying the seals;

b) that, within three months of a certain date, the St. Petersburg and Moscow merchants should arrange for the weighing and sealing of teas intended for the aforementioned places. Within six months, the local merchants must sell the tea in open places. After this time, if tea is found in their possession that is not sealed, it is to be confiscated as contraband and the owners are to be subject to the prescribed penalty;

c) that, for small-scale sales, no more than half a pound of tea may be kept in open boxes. Petersburg and Moscow merchants arrange for the weighing and sealing of tea intended for the aforementioned places. Within six months, local merchants must sell any tea they have in open places. After this time, any unsealed tea found in their possession will be confiscated as contraband and the owners will be subject to the prescribed penalty.

For small-scale sales, no more than half a pound of tea may be kept in open boxes. However, the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Empire deemed it inconvenient for traders to send Kiakhta tea to the Kingdom of Poland and other destinations determined by the commissions. This tea was to be weighed in pounds and half-pounds under customs seals, as had already been recognised when considering the project of the merchant Pilenkov.

7) In 1846, it was proposed that the regulation on weighing tea in pounds at the St. Petersburg and Moscow Customs should be abolished, and that tea should instead be presented to the Customs already weighed in pounds by the owner, who would then affix seals and stamps. It was also proposed that the owner's address should be displayed on each pound so that the local authorities could always verify the true quality of Chinese tea. This project had no consequences.

8) In 1848, the Committee for Kiakhta Trade Affairs, chaired by the Military Governor-General in Moscow, proposed establishing the sale of Kiakhta tea in small premises in the western border provinces and the Kingdom of Poland, with packages affixed at the St. Petersburg and Moscow Customs. However, this proposal was rejected by the former Viceroy in the Kingdom of Poland. They acknowledged that pouring tea from cibiks into cartridges would be difficult and expensive, and would not reduce smuggling because Jews would be able to counterfeit cartridges and packages. Consumers would also not know what kind of tea they were buying. Furthermore, the Russian Empire's Minister of Internal Affairs added that using packages for tea sales, accompanied by police and fiscal supervision, would burden both trade and ordinary people.

Following the removal of the customs line between the Empire and the Kingdom of Poland in 1851, these rules were extended to the Orthodox provinces. Other measures were also tried at that time, such as strengthening the border guard, sending nine officials to Poland to investigate and prosecute smuggling, and increasing the reward for those who caught smugglers in 1854. However, nothing helped and complaints about smuggled tea increased. Consequently, a number of projects aimed at stopping

smuggling emerged. Incidentally, in 1851 the Viceroy of the Kingdom of Poland proposed placing government seals on cartons of tea from Kiakhtha [3].

#### *F. Tea Packaging*

The Special Committee on Trade with China, established under the Ministry of Finance of the Russian Empire, discussed measures against tea smuggling and recognised that there were only two ways to counteract it:

Either allow the import of tea along the western border with a duty so low that smuggling would not be profitable;

Or to introduce a parcel system for the tea trade.

The committee concluded that the first method could not be implemented without undermining the Kiakhtha trade, while the second, despite presenting many inconveniences and difficulties, was the only method that could prevent the large-scale introduction of contraband tea, support Russian trade relations with China, and protect consumers from fraud and abuse in the tea trade [5].

The committee reached this conclusion based on the following considerations:

Firstly, the packages will serve as the most reliable means of distinguishing correctly imported teas from smuggled and counterfeit teas at first glance. Retailers will be deprived of the opportunity to openly sell Cantonese and counterfeit teas alongside Kiakhtha teas. This will destroy the strong incentive for smuggling and counterfeiting in the tea trade.

Secondly, the introduction of packaging will ensure the sale of Kiakhtha teas in Russia and inevitably lead to Russian merchants trading more of these teas. At the same time, Russian trade relations with China will expand, customs revenue will increase, and the export of our goods to China will increase. Thirdly, with the development of the tea trade on the Chinese border, we should expect a reduction in the price of tea because increased competition between tea merchants will result in consumers paying similar prices to those paid by Russian merchants.

Fourthly, the packaging of teas, which will protect them from waste on the way between Kiakhtha and Moscow, will bring such benefits to the merchants that they will not only cover the costs of packing tea in packaging premises, but they will even perhaps contribute to making them cheaper.

Fifthly, the indicated measure was not new. It had already been introduced by the Russians. It exists for the sale of tobacco. Furthermore, the committee recognised that, even if the import of Cantonese tea to Russia were permitted, it would still be necessary to package the tea in order to protect consumers from counterfeiting and distinguish correctly imported tea from contraband.

It was decided that the matter of the packages should be looked at again, in connection with all issues relating to trade with China. In 1859, the Minister of Finance submitted a note to the State Council on amending the trade rules with China and allowing the import of Cantonese tea. While supporting this import, the note considered it necessary to prevent smuggling by selling this tea in packaged premises in the western region, the Novorossiysk provinces and the Bessarabian region, and by banning its storage in warehouses and transportation in open spaces. At the same time, the minister recognised that prosecuting smuggling and counterfeiting in the tea trade would nevertheless encounter great difficulties due to the impossibility of providing sufficient supervision over the small-scale sale of tea everywhere. Based on this, the import of Cantonese tea by sea and over the land border was permitted in 1861 [3]. To protect the regular tea trade against smuggling in the western provinces of the Baltic Sea, Belarus and the Kingdom of Poland, wholesale sales of tea were permitted in large premises behind customs seals. Retail sales were permitted in banderol-sealed cartridges or boxes containing one pound of tea. For small sales of less than a pound and for displaying samples, each establishment was permitted to have no more than two open pound cartridges of commercial tea (one of the highest grade and one of the lowest grade) and an equal number of cartridges containing flower and green teas. At the same time, it was decided that the scattering of tea in small rooms and the gluing of packages should both be carried out in customs. This prohibited the storage and transportation of tea in any kind of sealed package without a customs seal in the aforementioned areas.

These rules were also extended to the sale of teas from Kiakhtha in the same regions.

In 1862, the import of tea by sea and land to the Transcaucasian region was permitted, and these same rules were extended to it.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Consequently, tea smuggling initially increased as duties rose, and thus, with the subsequent reduction of these duties, the opposite phenomenon must ensue – a decrease in smuggling and an increase in customs revenue by those millions of figures that now constituted a bonus for smugglers and their associated agents and traders. After all, the halt in the increase of tea imports for domestic consumption can be explained by nothing other than the development of smuggling, which undoubtedly continued to increase. As tea duty provided around a third of total customs revenue and tea smuggling probably exceeded the value of all other smuggling combined, the enormous sums spent on customs supervision must also have been significantly attributed to the tea duty.

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