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The Image of Ceylon at the Turn of the 20th Century: Reports of the Russian Vice-Consuls

Abstract

The article addresses one of less studied aspects of the source studies of the history of the Russo-Lankan relations at the turn of the 20th century. It presents an overview of archival documents, primarily from the fonds of the Central Asian table, the 2nd Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, the Russian Embassy in London, all stored in the Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Empire, that reveal the process of establishing economic ties between Russia and Ceylon during the British rule in the island. The author focuses on the facts gathered by Russian vice-consuls and consular agents who worked in Colombo, familiarizing themselves with the economic situation of Ceylon, its importance both for the metropolis and

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other countries and for Russia itself, primarily in terms of colonial goods trade. Thus the image of Ceylon was formed, while Ceylonese studies were yet incipient in Russia. The article analyzes, above all, unpublished materials that were not included in the “Consular reports” published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Empire or in the thematic collection of documents “Russians in Ceylon in late 19th – early 20th century” published by T. N. Zagorodnikova. The importance of their analysis correlates with the fact that they include sources of different types, such as official information, reports, official correspondence. The author concludes that the said documents, deposited in the fonds of the Central Asian table, the Russian Embassy in London, and the 2nd Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, allow to reconstruct the perception of economic situation in Ceylon by the Russians of the period. They show that in the official circles of Tsarist Russia by the early 20th century there was ripening an understanding of Ceylon’s significance as an economic and trading partner; to this contributed a number of factors, such as its geographical location, climatic conditions, development of infrastructure, economic and commercial interests of Russia and Great Britain in the region, etc.



Keywords

Historical sources, 2nd Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry, integration of Russia into world economy, Ceylon, colony, metropolis, image of a country, international trade, world tea market, infrastructure.

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