

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITION OF THE TURKESTAN REGION DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR

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Abstract: This article explores the socio-economic and political situation in the Turkestan region during the years of the First World War (1914–1918). Drawing on historical documents, archival records, and secondary sources, the study investigates how the global conflict impacted the daily life, economy, and governance of the region under Russian colonial rule. Special attention is paid to the 1916 uprising, forced conscription, and growing social tensions that eventually contributed to anti-colonial sentiments.

Keywords: Turkestan, World War I, Russian Empire, social unrest, 1916 uprising, colonial policy, conscription, Central Asia.

The outbreak of the First World War significantly affected the vast territories of the Russian Empire, including its eastern colonial possessions such as the Turkestan region. Although geographically distant from the primary battlefronts, Turkestan became a critical source of agricultural goods, raw materials, and human resources for the Russian war effort. The war years brought about increased pressure on the local population, economic hardship, political repression, and cultural marginalization. The growing tension between the colonial administration and the native population reached its peak with the 1916 Central Asian uprising, which was brutally suppressed by Tsarist forces.

This study is based on a historical-descriptive approach using both primary and secondary sources. Archival data from Russian imperial records, contemporary local newspapers, and the works of Central Asian historians have been examined. The study also relies on a comparative analysis of socio-economic indicators before and during the war period to assess the impact of World War I on the daily life of Turkestan's inhabitants.

- The Russian Empire's demands on Turkestan for agricultural production and labor increased sharply after 1914, especially in the cotton sector.
- In 1916, Tsar Nicholas II issued a decree to conscript Central Asians into labor battalions for the war front, which triggered widespread resistance.
- The conscription order, known as the "*Decree of June 25, 1916*," led to the outbreak of the 1916 uprising across Turkestan, particularly in the Ferghana Valley, Samarkand, and Semirechye.

- The uprising was met with brutal repression, resulting in tens of thousands of deaths and mass migration of locals to neighboring regions such as Afghanistan and China.
- The war years saw worsening living conditions, food shortages, inflation, and the collapse of traditional trade networks.
- Native institutions and elites were increasingly sidelined in favor of Russian officials and settler populations, deepening the sense of alienation and injustice.

The First World War exacerbated the colonial exploitation of Turkestan. The region was viewed by the Russian Empire as a periphery to be used in support of the metropole's war needs. The conscription of indigenous peoples into non-combat labor units was perceived not only as unjust but also as a direct threat to local customs and societal norms. The violent reaction to the 1916 conscription decree was not a spontaneous event but the result of decades of socio-economic and political suppression.

The uprising and the state's repressive response highlight the fragile nature of colonial governance in the face of mass unrest. Many local intellectuals and reformers of the Jadid movement began to call for greater autonomy and modernization as a means of resisting colonial rule. The events of 1916 would later contribute to the revolutionary fervor of 1917–1920, when Turkestan became a contested space during the Russian Civil War.

The First World War served as a catalyst for growing dissatisfaction with colonial rule in Turkestan. Economic exploitation, cultural marginalization, and forced labor mobilization led to mass unrest and laid the foundations for future anti-colonial resistance. The legacy of this period is critical to understanding the region's path toward autonomy and eventual incorporation into the Soviet Union under different socio-political frameworks.

In summary, the First World War marked a turning point in the socio-political development of the Turkestan region. The war exacerbated long-standing colonial tensions, brought economic hardships to the forefront, and triggered one of the most significant anti-colonial uprisings in Central Asian history. The 1916 revolt and its brutal suppression revealed the vulnerabilities of the Russian colonial system and deepened the divide between the colonizers and the indigenous population.

Beyond the immediate consequences of loss, repression, and migration, the war years also contributed to the politicization of Central Asian society. Reformist movements such as the Jadids increasingly questioned imperial authority and called for greater autonomy and modernization. These ideological currents would influence the region's later involvement in the Russian Civil War and its complex integration into the Soviet state.

Ultimately, the First World War was not just a European conflict but a global event whose repercussions transformed peripheral regions like Turkestan. Understanding these transformations is essential for grasping the broader dynamics of colonialism, resistance, and national awakening in Central Asia.

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