

CONDITIONS OF LIVING AND ACTIVITY IN THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC LIFE OF EUROPEAN CAPTIVES IN THE TURKESTAN REGION

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Abstract : *This article provides information on the living conditions and socio-economic activities of European prisoners of war in Turkestan. Furthermore, the deportation of European prisoners of war to Turkestan during the First World War had a lasting impact on the region's socio-economic life. Their forced labor played an important role in the reconstruction of Turkestan's infrastructure, particularly agriculture, mining, and construction. Despite the difficult conditions they faced, many prisoners adapted to life in the region and made a significant contribution to its economic and social development, although their presence reflected the tension and complexity of the post-war period.*

Keywords: *Prisoners, First World War, October Revolution, Turkestan, Soviet system.*

The intervention of European prisoners of war (prisoners) in the socio-economic life of Turkestan during and after the deportation of prisoners of war after the First World War is an interesting and complex chapter in the history of the region. In the period from 1914 to the early 1920s, significant changes occurred in the demographic and economic landscape of Turkestan, largely formed as a result of the arrival and subsequent forced labor of thousands of prisoners of war, mainly Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German, and Ottoman troops. These prisoners were captured on the Eastern Front in battles between the Russian Empire and the central powers. In the years following their capture, many were brought to Central Asia, in particular to the region known as Turkestan (which includes parts of present-day Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan)[1].

Geopolitical changes during and after the First World War played a decisive role in determining the fate of these prisoners of war. When the Russian Empire collapsed in 1917 due to the February and October Revolutions, Turkestan, which



was under the control of Imperial Russia before the war, found itself in a very difficult situation[2]. The fall of the imperial government left a power vacuum filled by various local and national forces, including the Soviet Red Army after the Bolshevik revolution. However, the immediate consequences of the war also coincided with political instability, local uprisings, and the gradual strengthening of Soviet power in the region.

At the same time, the economic system of the region struggled due to the fragmentation of Russian infrastructure, the effects of the war itself, and a number of natural disasters. In the context of economic decline and recovery, there was an urgent need for labor, and the Soviet government, and later local authorities, looked after a large contingent of prisoners of war held in camps throughout Central Asia. These prisoners, many of whom had no hope of returning home due to the end of the war and changes in the political order, were employed in various labor-intensive industries[3].

The labor of these prisoners had a great impact on the economy and infrastructure of Turkestan. They were engaged in a wide range of economic activities, including agriculture, in particular cotton growing, which was the main export product for the Russian Empire, and the development of local industry. The prisoners also worked on construction projects, contributing to the construction of railways, bridges, and other infrastructure crucial for the region's economic integration into the Soviet system. Many were engaged in mining and resource extraction, and these areas required large labor force due to the lack of local labor force that could be mobilized[4].

The scale of this forced labor was large. By the beginning of the 1920s, it was estimated that there were tens of thousands of prisoners of war in Turkestan. These prisoners of war, mainly German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers, were primarily subjected to heavy physical labor in the periphery of the region. Officials organized them into labor battalions, often deployed to perform extremely difficult or dangerous tasks. Although the exact figures vary depending on the source, it is clear that their activities had a direct impact both on the local economy and on the broad development of Soviet Central Asia[5].

However, their existence was not without tension. While prisoners of war were important to the economy, they were treated harshly and often exploited. Most of the prisoners were not given freedom to leave the camps or move freely within the territory of Turkestan, and many suffered from insufficient food, poor living

conditions, and the arduous nature of their work. There were also concerns about the ideological consequences of such a large number of foreign soldiers from many hostile countries living in the region now under Soviet control. The presence of many prisoners of war in Europe resembled a war that had just ended, and the Soviet government sought to manage them in a way that would not disrupt the fragile political stability it intended to build in the region [6].

Despite such difficulties, some prisoners of war managed to establish contact with the local population, and some of them, in particular the Germans, settled in Turkestan after the war. Over time, a small community of German-speaking nomads formed in the region, some of whom contributed to the cultural and economic development of Turkestan in various ways. For example, some German prisoners of war used their technical skills to modernize agricultural practices, particularly the cotton industry, while others engaged in local trade and commerce. Their interference in the socio-economic life of Turkestan, although often born out of necessity and coercion, testified to the resilience and adaptability of people in difficult conditions.

The deportation and forced labor of prisoners of war in Turkestan officially ended by the beginning of the 1920s with the gradual strengthening of Soviet control in Central Asia. However, their contribution to the region's economy persisted for a long time after their departure. The infrastructure projects they worked on, including the expansion of the railway system and the development of agricultural systems in the arid lands of Turkestan, laid the foundation for the collectivization and industrialization programs of the Soviet era. In addition, the integration of prisoners of war into the workforce helped fill the gaps created by the loss of local labor during the war and revolutionary uprisings [7].

By the mid-1920s, when the Soviet regime established its dominance, the last European prisoners of war were either returned to their homeland or found new life in Soviet Turkestan. However, some of them were permanent members of local communities, married local women, and started families in the region. Thus, their existence and activity became part of the broader story of Soviet modernization in Central Asia.

The living conditions of European prisoners of war after their resettlement to Turkestan were difficult and inhuman, shaped by a combination of the physical environment, insufficient funds, and the attitude of those who captured them. Turkestan, which later became part of the Soviet Union, was a region with a harsh

climate and complex terrain, the factors that caused the suffering of prisoners of war who were transferred there after being captured during the Russian Empire, the First World War, and the Russian Civil War[8].

European prisoners arriving in Turkestan, primarily from Germany, Austria-Hungary, and other central states, were often subjected to urgent and arduous labor. The Russian government and local military commanders used prisoners as forced labor in various projects, including agricultural work, the construction of roads, railways, and fortifications, and even the development of the mining and other resource extraction industry[9]. The work was arduous and many prisoners did not adapt to physical demands, given that they were weakened due to poor nutrition, harsh conditions, and being in captivity. The lack of appropriate clothing and equipment exacerbated the situation.

The climate of Turkestan, especially the extreme heat in the summer and the cold in the winter, was an important factor in the poverty of prisoners. Disease outbreaks occurred frequently, and prisoners had limited access to medical care. Typhoid, dysentery, and malaria were widespread, and local hospitals and medical facilities were poorly equipped to treat a large number of sick prisoners. Many prisoners of war died before they could recover from illness, malnutrition, or fatigue.

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