

THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIO-POLITICAL SITUATION IN TURKESTAN (1917–1920)**Xolisov Bunyod Ashurali ugli**

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Abstract

This article examines the socio-economic conditions of Turkestan during the period of Soviet rule. The authors analyze the policy of economic centralization implemented by the Soviet authorities, the social status of existing social strata in the region, and their role in political processes. In addition, the article provides scholarly reflections on the decline of the national economy of Turkestan as a consequence of the “War Communism” policy, serving as supplementary material for researchers.

Keywords

War Communism, Turkestan region, socio-economic conditions, New Economic Policy, trade unions, Turkestan Economic Council, cotton monoculture.

Introduction

In February 1917, a democratic revolution triumphed in Russia, resulting in the establishment of the Provisional Government. On October 25 (November 7), 1917, the Provisional Government was overthrown, and the Council of People’s Commissars was formed under the leadership of V. I. Lenin. At that time, the First World War was still ongoing, and the economic situation in Turkestan was extremely difficult.

On November 26–28, 1917, the Extraordinary Fourth Congress of the Muslim population of the region was held in Kokand. The congress declared that “the main issue was identified as determining the steps toward governing Turkestan through democratic means.” However, the Bolsheviks leading the councils of workers’ and soldiers’ deputies refused to recognize the Autonomous Government of Turkestan, arguing instead that Turkestan required a workers’ and peasants’ autonomy.

On April 20, 1918, the Fifth Congress of the Regional Councils of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies was convened, and on April 30 it was proclaimed that the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) had been established within the RSFSR. At the Sixth Congress of the Soviets of the Turkestan ASSR (October 5–14, 1918), based on the Constitution of the RSFSR, the “Constitution of the Turkestan Republic” was adopted.

Nevertheless, the political situation in the region became increasingly tense. In many provinces, the local population intensified armed resistance against the Soviet system. Under these circumstances, an army of Russian and other European peasants led by Monstrov initially attacked rural settlements in the Fergana Valley. However, the forcible confiscation of food supplies, fodder, and horses from peasant farms by Bolshevik authorities provoked strong resistance. As a result, in August 1919, Monstrov’s army in Jalal-Abad joined forces with Madaminbek’s detachments and launched an armed struggle against Soviet power.

Main Part

In the summer of 1920, peasants in the region were officially labeled as kulaks. A government decree mandated the punishment of one out of every ten peasants and the imprisonment of the rest.

Serious political struggles also continued within the Soviet power system dominated by Europeans. On January 18–19, 1919, military units led by K. Osipov, the military commissar of the Turkestan ASSR, staged an uprising. Fourteen commissars appointed by the Bolsheviks were executed. The uprising, however, was eventually suppressed by Bolshevik forces.

The organizational structure of the Regional Communist Party was further strengthened. In March 1919, the Regional Bureau of Muslim Communists (Musbyuro) was established within the Regional Committee of the Turkestan Communist Party. Its leadership included Turar Ryskulov, N. Khojayev, A. Mukhitdinov, and others.

From the first days following the October Revolution, the Soviet variant of transforming the tsarist colonial system—characterized by exploitative forms and methods of using land, water, labor resources, and material wealth in Turkestan—began to be implemented. This transformation was carried out under the ideology and practice of the “War Communism” regime, reflecting the aggressive pursuit of the so-called “bright future” envisioned by the “red center.”

The campaign to nationalize industry in Turkestan began at the end of 1917, even before the mass escalation of the national liberation movement. Compared to central Russia, this process proceeded at a much faster pace. For example, while by mid-1918 only 11% of enterprises in Soviet Russia had been nationalized, this figure reached 45% in Turkestan.

The Soviet government prioritized the nationalization of enterprises in key industrial sectors of the region. Guided by imperial logic, particular emphasis was placed on sectors responsible for supplying raw cotton to the central textile industry. On February 28, 1918, the Council of People’s Commissars of Turkestan adopted a decree on the confiscation of cotton. This was followed on March 5, 1918, by the decree “On the Nationalization of Cotton-Ginning Industry, Oil and Cottonseed Production, and Enterprises Engaged in the Purchase and Sale of Semi-Finished Products.” According to this decree, 273 cotton-ginning plants, 38 oil, soap, and fat-processing factories, dozens of cotton firms, and nearly 40 small enterprises were transferred to state ownership.

The “successes” achieved in the nationalization of the cotton industry enabled F. I. Kolesov to report enthusiastically to V. I. Lenin on May 5, 1919: “The cotton industry is of immense importance for all of Russia—ways for its further development are being ensured... at present, we are capable of delivering cotton worth 1 billion 700 million rubles at your disposal.”

As a result of the implementation of “Red Guard-style attacks on capital,” more than 80% of high-quality production by the summer of 1918 came from enterprises that had been nationalized. Priority was given to taking control of strategic economic structures and industrial enterprises essential for raw material supply and military production.

The large-scale nationalization of private property aimed at forming an administratively subordinated economy under an authoritarian regime was accompanied by the establishment of a centralized system of economic management directly linked to the highest political leadership of the Center. For instance, on December 2, 1917, the Supreme Council of the National Economy (VSNKh) was established under the Council of People’s Commissars of the RSFSR, tasked with supervising economic activities in the regions, including Turkestan.

At the initial stage, alongside governmental bodies responsible for implementing the economic centralization of the region, the Central Council of the National Economy of the Turkestan Republic, subordinate to the Supreme Council of the National Economy (VSNKh), was actively operating. This council was established on December 18, 1918. Subsequently, Councils of the National Economy were formed at the regional level, and by the end of 1919, these councils had begun functioning in 37 cities and all provinces of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR).

The centralization of industry under Soviet state control made it possible to direct industrial activity toward a clearly defined goal—primarily meeting the needs of the Red Army, which constituted the main force of the communist state system. For example, in Tashkent alone, 228 enterprises were engaged in production for “defense” purposes. As a result of the complete militarization of the republic’s industrial complex, by 1919 the government succeeded in ensuring uninterrupted resource supplies for its troops. During this period, Turkestan’s industry began almost fully supplying Red Army units with clothing and weapons. Certain types of

military products that had previously been imported from central Russia were now produced locally on a large scale.

Relying on support from the central authorities, the Turkestan Central Executive Committee sent an alarming telegram to Moscow in early December 1918: “For the past six months, Turkestan has been in a state of siege. All imported goods have been completely exhausted.” However, the Kremlin leadership showed little interest in satisfying the population’s basic needs. The volume of consumer goods transported from Russia continued to decline and by the autumn of 1920 amounted to only 1.8% of the 1914 level.

Indeed, in an attempt to overcome severe shortages of goods at the local level, semi-handicraft and artisan workshops began to emerge, producing footwear, clothing, and household items. However, these products were soon primarily requisitioned for supplying Red Army units. For instance, on November 1, 1918, the newspaper *Golos Samarkanda* officially appealed to artisans and craftsmen, announcing that the government would requisition clothing from all tailoring and shoemaking workshops “for the army.”

In order to involve a group of approximately 150,000 artisans and craftsmen from Turkestan in addressing the strategic task of strengthening the new government’s position, the central authorities recommended their rapid organization into cooperatives. Reflecting the imperial-style rhetoric of the center, the Third Congress of the Turkestan Communist Party demanded the swift unification of free artisans and handicraftsmen into cooperatives and their inclusion in the “general plan for supplying the country.” As a practical implementation of this directive, a special department for handicraft industry was established in July 1918 under the People’s Commissariat of Industry of Turkestan. This department was tasked with integrating artisans into the overall plan to support the material resources of “Red Russia.” As a result, artisans—driven into a rigid system based on total state control across all sectors and deprived of the right to sell raw materials and finished products independently—became completely subordinate to the state.

Using a centralized system of normative distribution, the authorities allocated only a negligible share of already scarce industrial goods to the population. For example, in July 1919, less than 20% of the total distributed products reached the population. Widespread famine, which deprived hundreds of thousands of people of their means of subsistence, became intertwined with acute shortages of goods.

As aptly noted by the delegate Nizomboyev, a representative of the people, during his speech at the Seventh Congress of Turkestan Soviets (March 1919), the population initially expected democratic reforms from the October Revolution. However, they soon began increasingly comparing Soviet governance methods with those of the tsarist administration, finding them strikingly similar.

In addition, the practice of forcibly mobilizing the population for unpaid compulsory labor became widespread. For example, in accordance with a decision of the Council of People’s Commissars of the Turkestan Republic, a Fuel Directorate headed by S.N. Shumilov was established as early as the first half of September 1918. This body was endowed with broad powers, allowing it to mobilize various groups of the population for fuel production, ranging from oil and coal extraction to the harvesting of saxaul and other types of firewood. As a result, by the end of the year, it became possible to prepare 70 million poods of saxaul fuel. This method of mobilizing labor resources was actively employed. In 1919 alone, under the law on compulsory labor, 12,602 people were mobilized in the Fergana region and 7,481 people in the Samarkand region.

Despite revolutionary appeals, labor productivity continued to decline daily in Turkestan, as it did throughout the country. According to official data, average prices increased forty-eightfold between January 1919 and July 1920. From 1918 to 1920, the volume of money in circulation in the republic increased by 120 times.

Alongside the rapid devaluation of the ruble, prolonged non-payment of wages became a common occurrence. For example, reports from the Samarkand metal plant (formerly the Gorenberg plant) in May 1918 indicated that there was often not a single kopek left in the cash office and that “the plant’s financial situation was deplorable.”

The Soviet government also began introducing subbotniks (voluntary unpaid labor days) throughout the region. The first subbotnik in Turkestan was held on October 11, 1919, in the yard of the freight station in Tashkent. One week later, a second subbotnik was organized, involving approximately 500 participants. The regional party committee decided to extend the initiative of Tashkent workers across the entire republic. Consequently, from late 1919, subbotniks began to be held in the Fergana Valley as well. From January 1920 onward, subbotniks took place in Samarkand, Andijan, Bukhara, Namangan, and other cities of the region. Communist subbotniks were especially widespread during revolutionary holidays. For example, following the decision of the Ninth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) to hold a May Day subbotnik, more than 32,000 people gathered at collection points in Tashkent alone. In New Bukhara, during the May Day subbotnik, 736 tons of wool destined for shipment to the center were loaded over six hours, along with 272 tons of seed cotton and six railcars of saxaul.

From the very beginning, the ideologized economy imposed by the Soviet state across its territory demonstrated its inefficiency. From the moment of the October victory, the Kremlin leadership steered the country into a dead end of economic irrationality. The national economy of Turkestan also found itself on the brink of collapse. Industrial production, in particular, was in an extremely depressed state. Statistical data indicate that by 1920, the total gross industrial output of the region had declined by 80% compared to 1914. Of the 249 cotton-ginning factories, only 16 remained operational. Compared to 1913, cotton fiber production decreased twenty-threefold, while cottonseed oil production declined fiftyfold. The fuel and raw material production sector also continued to shrink. In particular, coal extraction at the mines of Kyzyl-Kiya, Sulyukta, Shurob, and other sites fell from 122 million poods in 1916 to just 7 million poods in 1921. The extraction of ozokerite and oil in Cheleken also declined sharply.

At that time, the transport sector was also in a critical condition. There was an acute shortage of steam locomotives, railway infrastructure had become extremely outdated, many railway bridges and tracks were damaged, and fuel supplies were insufficient. As a result, in 1920 the freight turnover of the railways of the Turkestan Republic amounted to less than 40% of the prewar level. A report submitted to the State Planning Committee by V. P. Nogin, a member of the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the National Economy, provides a vivid picture of the condition of railway transport during those years.

It should also be noted that, taking into account the persistent demands of the central regions of Soviet Russia to supply the textile industry with cotton, as well as based on the decision of the Supreme Council of the National Economy of the RSFSR “On the Monopolization of Cotton Affairs,” on February 26, 1918, the Council of People’s Commissars of the Turkestan Republic adopted a decree “On the Confiscation of Cotton in the Region.” This document, signed by F. I. Kolesov, stated the following: “All existing cotton reserves in the Turkestan region, regardless of their form or location, are hereby confiscated and declared the property of the workers’ government of the Turkestan region. All Soviets of the region and revolutionary railway committees are hereby instructed to immediately implement this decree, to bring all cotton to locations near railway stations, and to appoint their representatives to ensure its rapid dispatch to Tashkent station.” It was further stated that if owners resisted, all measures up to and including execution were to be applied.

As a result, by mid-1918 it became possible to confiscate nearly 7 million poods of cotton, which was immediately sent to the Center.

In December 1918, while reporting to the Supreme Council of the National Economy of the RSFSR on the situation in Turkestan, N. I. Sundatov was forced to admit that “the cotton

situation is extremely poor.” This was no coincidence, as the 1918 cotton season had been completely ruined. Alarmed by this situation, the central government dispatched new agents to Turkestan. On February 2, 1919, another expedition organized by the Textile Center (Tsentrtekstil) was sent from Moscow to Tashkent, headed by Shvarts.

During the Civil War, Turkestan was cut off from Russia for a certain period. As a result, large quantities of raw materials accumulated in factory warehouses and at railway stations: 6.5 million poods of cotton fiber, 0.5 million poods of wool, 1.5 million hides, and other materials, which the central government was eagerly awaiting. Indeed, during 1920 alone, more than 6,730 railway wagons of cotton, over 1,100 wagons of raw hides, and other goods were shipped from the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic to the central provinces of Russia.

At the same time, cotton—which was three times more expensive than high-quality grain—was severely devalued, since the fixed state price set for cotton did not correspond at all to the rapidly rising price of grain.

The Leninist administration found a solution to this crisis through a traditional Marxist approach. On November 2, 1920, the Council of People’s Commissars of the RSFSR adopted a directive decree declaring all activities related to the restoration of cotton farming and the intensification of cotton deliveries to be militarized. In other words, the authorities openly shifted to a policy of coercion.

As a result of punitive and coercive methods, by January 1921, 7 million poods of cotton fiber, 327,000 poods of linters, and 103,000 poods of cotton waste were prepared for shipment to the Center.

Under pressure from members of the Turkestan Commission V. V. Kuibyshev and F. I. Goloshchekin, a decision was adopted in August 1920 to introduce food requisitioning (prodrazvyorstka) throughout the territory of the Turkestan Republic. Food requisitioning turned into an outright plundering of the population and sharply intensified social tensions. By the end of 1920, 42 food collection detachments consisting solely of workers were formed, totaling about 3,000 people.

In the 1920–1921 agricultural year alone, food requisitioning detachments in the Turkestan Republic confiscated from the local population 9,708,703 poods of grain, 6,358,114 poods of fodder, 1,606,210 poods of meat, and other products. The confiscated goods were immediately dispatched to the Center.

Conclusion

In conclusion, following the establishment of Soviet power in Turkestan, profound changes occurred in the region’s socio-economic life. These changes were most clearly manifested in the severe decline of all sectors of the regional economy, caused by the mass export of national economic products to the Center.