BG Pulse Journal USA
ISSN:1947-2536 http://www.bgpulseusa.com/index.php/bg
BG PULSE JOURNAL

From Catastrophe to Institution: War, Famine and the Collapse of Traditional Welfare as Preconditions for Child Protection in Turkestan, 1917–1921

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doi:https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.24050999

Abstract. The institutions created in the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Turkestan ASSR) for homeless and neglected children—orphanages, children's commissions, reception points, labour communes—were not the product of an abstract welfare programme. They were an emergency response to a convergence of catastrophes between 1917 and 1921: the collapse of political order and the violent suppression of the Kokand autonomy, a prolonged civil conflict in the Ferghana Valley, the severing of the cotton-for-grain economy that tied Turkestan to central Russia, repeated local famines, and, from 1921, the arrival of thousands of child refugees from the Volga region and the Kazakh steppe. This article reconstructs these causal chains on the basis of archival documents, the contemporary press and the secondary literature, and argues that the decisive factor was an "institutional vacuum": the pre-revolutionary system of mutual help, based on waqf endowments, neighbourhood solidarity and kinship, proved unable to cope with a crisis of this magnitude, while the Soviet system was not yet formed. The article also shows that the composition of the child population in need—heavily marked by displacement, age and ethnic difference—shaped the first institutional responses, which relied to a surprising extent on placing children in families rather than in institutions.

Keywords: Turkestan; famine; civil war; homeless children; Ferghana Valley; depopulation; child refugees; early Soviet welfare

1. Introduction

Studies of Soviet child welfare often begin with the institutions—decrees, commissions, orphanages—and treat the child in need as a given. This article reverses the perspective. It asks why, by the early 1920s, Turkestan had thousands of children outside any family or institutional care, and why the first institutional response took the form it did. The question is important for two reasons. First, the later network of orphanages, reception-distribution points and labour communes was, in substance, a direct consequence of the events of 1917–1921; it cannot be understood apart from them. Second, Turkestan's crisis was layered. It was simultaneously a theatre of political and military conflict, a victim of economic disintegration, a region with its own famines, and a destination for people fleeing the far greater famines of the Volga and the steppe.

The discussion draws on four kinds of material: the work of historians of Turkestan's political and economic history (Khalid, Buttino) [1; 3]; Uzbek and Kazakh studies of famine and of homeless children [4; 5; 8; 9]; documents of the National Archive of Uzbekistan (NAU) on the early children's commissions [14; 15; 16]; and the contemporary press, notably Izvestiya and the Turkestan newspapers analysed by Mamadaliev [4; 17]. Wherever the evidence comes from outside Turkestan (the Volga region, the Kazakh steppe, all-Russian statistics), this is stated.

2. Political rupture and the displacement of families

2.1. Dual power and the exclusion of the local population

The February and October revolutions of 1917 produced deep political shocks in Turkestan. After February, a situation of dual power emerged, with competition between the Turkestan Committee and the Tashkent Soviet. The Tashkent Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was composed mainly of Russian settlers and soldiers, while representatives of the local Muslim population were in practice kept out of power [3]. The result was a weakening of social solidarity and of trust between ethnic and social groups. For the subject of this article the consequence is crucial: the traditional mechanisms of social protection—the neighbourhood (mahalla), the waqf and religious charity—began to erode precisely when demand for them was rising, and the customary ways of supporting orphaned and needy children became more difficult to sustain.

2.2. Kokand and the Ferghana Valley

The Turkestan Autonomy proclaimed in Kokand in November 1917 was crushed by Red Guard units in February 1918; much of the city was destroyed and thousands of civilians died [3]. The event had demographic as well as political effects. Many families lost homes, property and livelihoods; part of the urban population moved to neighbouring villages, and the likelihood that children would fall outside parental supervision increased.

In the Ferghana Valley, the most densely populated and economically developed part of the region, military operations between 1918 and 1923 halted agriculture and crafts and destroyed numerous villages. Families were forced to move and to change residence frequently, which made regular schooling and stable family upbringing practically impossible. The so-called basmachi movement should be understood as broader than a military-political conflict: it was accompanied by the disruption of agricultural production, the closure of trade routes and sharp rises in local food prices, which impoverished many peasant households and left them unable to feed their children. Children living in conflict zones were, moreover, often regarded by both sides as "untrustworthy", which further increased their need for social protection. Political upheavals in Bukhara and Khiva in 1920, although these territories were not formally part of the Turkestan ASSR, are described in the literature as adding to the general instability and to the flow of refugees and orphans toward Turkestan's central cities.

Usmanov's periodisation identifies 1918–1920 as the second stage of the formation of child neglect in Uzbekistan, during which the majority of homeless children appeared as a result of local conflicts and military operations [6]. This chronology is adopted here.

3. Economic collapse and depopulation

Political crisis was accompanied by an equally severe economic one. On the basis of archival statistics, Buttino estimates that Turkestan's population fell by approximately two million people—about 27 per cent—between 1916 and 1920, as a result of the combined effects of war, famine, epidemics and forced displacement [1]. He also demonstrates that after 1917 the traditional exchange of Turkestan's raw cotton for grain and food from Russia rapidly broke down and finally ceased altogether [1]. Because the regional economy had, since the colonial period, specialised in cotton and depended heavily on grain imported from central Russia, the rupture produced immediate and severe food shortage. Buttino's calculations also indicate substantial declines in sown area and livestock, so that the region could not compensate for the collapse of imports from its own resources, and that cotton production itself fell sharply over the first years after 1917, partly because peasants shifted to food crops and partly because transport and trade links were severed [1].

The causes of the food crisis were not exclusively natural or external. Rakhmatov's study of the Turkestan famine points to the food policy of the Soviet authorities under "war communism"—including the requirement that peasants grow cotton while grain cultivation was restricted—which

reduced the region's ability to build up its own food reserves [8]. Rajabboev likewise examines how food requisitioning was carried out in local conditions, the quantities of produce taken from peasant households and the direct negative effects on living standards [9]. If these authors are right, then a significant part of the hardship that pushed children onto the streets was a direct consequence of state policy, not only of war or drought.

3.1. Evidence from the contemporary press

The press recorded the unfolding hunger very early. Mamadaliev's study shows that already in 1917 the newspaper Ulug' Turkiston was discussing food shortages; its issue of 13 May 1917 carried an article entitled "The Food Question", which noted that urban food committees were concerned mainly with supplying the Russian population, while the local population was largely overlooked [4]. In January 1918 conditions worsened: between 20 and 27 January, 115 people died of hunger and cold in three villages of Tashkent district—53 in Kurgan, 43 in Yavdol and 19 in Bukunani—as reported in the periodical press [4]. Such reports are significant not only as data but as evidence that, from the very beginning, famine in Turkestan was uneven: it affected the local population in ways that the first relief arrangements did not address.

4. Famine beyond Turkestan and the arrival of child migrants

4.1. The Volga famine

A further blow came in 1921, when the mass famine that began in the Volga region spread across the territory of the former Russian Empire. The famine is generally linked to the policy of grain requisitioning (prodrazverstka) combined with the drought of 1921, and it caused millions of deaths [2]. According to Mamadaliev's analysis of the Turkestan press, from 1921 many starving people and, especially, children separated from their parents began to be moved from the affected regions to Turkestan, a process that the local press followed regularly [4].

4.2. The Kazakh steppe

In the neighbouring Kazakh steppe the crisis was, if anything, more tragic. Cameron's monograph on Kazakhstan discusses famine in the region following the imposition of wartime food policy and the forced settlement of nomadic herders, whose livestock was confiscated; estimates of mortality cited in the literature for the famine of 1919–1922 range from some 400,000 to 1.5 million people [2]. Geographically, these processes affected the northern borderlands of the Turkestan ASSR (present-day southern Kazakhstan), from where, too, many orphaned and neglected children made their way to Turkestan.

Figures assembled by Saktaganova and Karsakova for the Kazakh territory give a sense of scale. According to official data, 128,000 homeless children were registered in the Kazakh republic on 1 December 1921, 158,000 by 31 December, and 333,043 by January 1922 [5]. In Akmola province alone, where the population was reduced to eating cats, dogs and various substitutes, 14 orphanages held 9,426 children and child mortality reached 40 per cent [5]. These data do not concern Turkestan directly, but they offer an empirical basis for assessing the regional magnitude of the disaster and for comparing parallel processes in the Turkestan ASSR.

The literature thus reveals a "chain of catastrophes" in the years 1917–1923: a local food crisis and political-military instability in Turkestan in 1917–1918; famine linked to the destruction of the nomadic economy on the Kazakh steppe in 1919–1922; and the drought-related famine of the Volga region in 1921–1923. These were mutually reinforcing, and their coincidence forced the young Soviet administration in Turkestan simultaneously to cope with its own internal famine and to receive and house children arriving from neighbouring regions—a double burden that the not yet consolidated state system could barely bear.

4.3. Turkestan as destination

Archival data on the influx are fragmentary but striking. In December 1922 alone, 873 homeless children were brought to Uzbekistan from the Volga region; in 1923 arrivals increased further, and in this period roughly 90 per cent of the homeless children on the territory of the republic were displaced children from other regions [14]. These children, suffering from hunger, were prepared to do any work to survive, and many resorted to begging and petty theft [14]. This finding has an important interpretative consequence. A large share of the visible "homeless child" problem in Turkestan in the early 1920s was not generated locally; it was imported, and it therefore combined with a distinct local problem—children of impoverished local families—that was less visible to the authorities and less often recorded.

5. Who were the children? Age, gender, place

The sources allow only a partial picture of the child population affected, but several tendencies are discernible.

Age. Infants and pre-school children (up to three years) suffered most in conditions of hunger and epidemics because of their low immunity; mortality among them was far higher than in other age groups. Adolescents (fourteen to eighteen) were physically stronger and more likely to survive, but they were excluded from regular schooling and vocational preparation and were drawn early into "survival strategies" on the street: begging, petty trade and, at times, theft.

Gender. The sources indicate that girls were more exposed to exploitation and violence, although this aspect has not yet been the subject of special statistical study.

Place. Tashkent, as the administrative and economic centre of the region, displayed the consequences of the crisis most clearly. In the Russian "New City", child homelessness was linked more to military-political causes (war, evacuation), whereas among the local population of the "Old City" it was more closely linked to food shortage and the disintegration of the traditional economy. This distinction, which remains a working hypothesis that needs further archival confirmation, helps explain why institutions and the inspection system created in Tashkent in 1922 were organised in three zones (Old City, New City and railway station) [16].

The consequences for the infants' institutions that already existed were severe. Press reports cited the case of an infant-care home in which 86 of 114 children died [17]. In 1921 the ten infant homes of Tashkent held up to 600 children, three-quarters of whom came from famine-stricken regions; morbidity was extremely high, and the entire contingent was served by one nurse and two orderlies; the press described such institutions as literally falling into ruin [17]. The crisis therefore appeared not only in the growing numbers of children on the street but also within institutions that were nominally under state care.

6. The institutional vacuum

Prior to 1917, the support of orphaned and needy children in the region rested on institutions funded by waqf property—charitable establishments attached to mosques and madrasas—together with mutual aid within the neighbourhood and the solidarity of the extended family. This system was not prepared for a mass tragedy of the scale experienced in 1917–1921 and in practice ceased to function. The period between the breakdown of the old arrangements and the formation of the new Soviet ones created an "institutional vacuum" in which thousands of children were left for a long time on the streets with no organised assistance.

The argument should not be pressed too far. Buttino and Khalid both suggest that informal networks—neighbourhood and kinship ties—continued to operate even where official institutions had weakened, and may have saved many families and children even though they left little trace in

official statistics [1; 3]. The “vacuum” was therefore a vacuum of formal, organised assistance, not of all help.

7. The first responses

The earliest state structure for the relief of the hungry and, especially, children in Turkestan was the Central Commission for the Relief of Famine Victims of the Turkestan Region (TsK PGK, commonly called the Turkestan Commission), formed on 20 November 1918 under the Turkestan Central Executive Committee. It was charged with assisting the population, including children brought from the Volga and Cis-Urals regions, whose number was officially estimated at 320,000 persons [7]. In October 1921 a Children’s Commission was formed within it and began receiving and distributing children with a staff of only three. As of 5 November 1921, the children placed through the commissions were reported as follows: Tashkent, 445; Aulie-Ata, 350; Samarkand, 500; Osh, 100; Bayramali, 100; Jizzakh, 87; and, in all, 8,923 children were said to have been given into families for upbringing [15].

Two cautions apply to these figures. The six city totals add up to only 1,582, far less than the stated overall total, so the 8,923 presumably covers other places or categories and should be treated as an approximation until the underlying files are re-examined. Even so, the document indicates something important: at the earliest stage the state relied largely on traditional, non-institutional forms—placement in families, a kind of patronage—because the institutional system had not yet taken shape.

On 10 October 1922 the commission was reorganised as the Turkestan Commission for the Improvement of Children’s Lives, with a wider remit than famine relief alone [16]. In 1922–1923 the population of the Ferghana Valley itself contributed 5,360 soms, 20,608 arshins of manufactured cloth, 4,225 sets of clothing and 1,631 pairs of footwear for children from famine-stricken regions [16]. Local people were thus active participants, alongside state agencies, in the response.

At the all-Russian level, the institutional answer—the State Council for the Protection of Children (1919), the commission headed by Dzerzhinsky (1921), reception-distribution points—was being formed at the same time [11]. International relief organisations such as the American Relief Administration and the Russian Red Cross contributed in the Volga region and, to a lesser extent, in Central Asia, feeding tens of thousands of children through canteens [12]. For Turkestan, however, their direct role was limited.

8. Conclusion

The history of institutions for neglected children in Turkestan begins in the catastrophe of 1917–1921. Four conclusions follow.

First, mass neglect was the product of interlocking causes—the suppression of Kokand and war in the Ferghana Valley, economic disconnection from central Russia and a demographic collapse of about 27 per cent between 1916 and 1920, state food policy, and the inflow of famine refugees—rather than of any single factor.

Second, the displaced character of the child population, with perhaps nine in ten of the homeless children in the republic in 1922–1923 coming from elsewhere, means that Turkestan’s institutions were shaped as much by the region’s position in a wider space of famine as by internal needs. The corresponding local problem, that of impoverished Uzbek and other local families, was comparatively less visible.

Third, the collapse of traditional welfare arrangements created an institutional vacuum, though informal solidarity persisted.

Fourth, the earliest responses relied on family placement and on commissions staffed by a handful of people, which explains both the speed with which structures appeared and their fragility. The later system of orphanages, labour communes and reformatories grew out of this improvised foundation.

Several questions remain open: the exact number of children affected, the differing experience of girls and boys, the fate of local children outside the institutions, and the real extent of informal assistance. Answering them will require further work in the archives and, where possible, oral-history sources.

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