

THE BEGINNING OF THE 1916 UPRISING IN TURKESTAN

Azizbek Husanovich Jumayev

Bukhara Province, Jondor District Polytechnic College, History Teacher
Phone: +998 88 292 66 36

Abstract: This article analyzes the initial stage of the 1916 uprising by the peoples of Turkestan against the colonial policies of the Russian Empire. Specifically, it considers the imperial decree issued on June 25, 1916, which mandated the conscription of local populations for forced labor on the rear front, as the direct cause of the rebellion. The study examines the emergence of the uprising in specific regions, the response of the local population, and the nature of this popular movement. It argues that the uprising's outbreak was closely connected to local socio-economic problems, national inequality, and the intensification of colonial policies. Additionally, the article discusses government measures taken in the early days of the rebellion. The research is based on historical documents, archival materials, and contemporary historiographical approaches. This article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the early phases of the 1916 uprising, a significant turning point in the history of Turkestan.

Keywords: Turkestan, national uprising, conscription decree, colonial policy, social unrest, armed resistance, popular movement, political repression, historical analysis, national consciousness, struggle for freedom.

Introduction

The history of Turkestan in the early 20th century is marked by complex and intense political, social, and economic processes. Particularly, during the period of intensified colonial policies of the Russian Empire, one of the most significant events affecting the local population's way of life was the large-scale popular movement known as the 1916 uprising. Although historical literature variously refers to this event as the "1916 revolt," "anti-conscription protest," or "national liberation movement," its roots lie in deep and multifaceted causes. The primary trigger for the uprising was the imperial decree issued on June 25, 1916, by Tsar Nicholas II, which stipulated the conscription of Muslim men aged 19 to 43 from Turkestan and other frontier regions for labor on the rear front lines. This decision caused strong resentment among local populations who had previously been exempt from military service. Moreover, the conscription exacerbated already existing social injustices, economic exploitation, national discrimination, and political disenfranchisement. Initially starting in the Ferghana Valley, Jizzakh, Syrdarya, and Kazakhstan regions, the uprising rapidly spread across Turkestan. This movement was not merely armed resistance but an expression of the people's determination to defend their rights, dignity, and freedom. The government's early responses, including the brutal suppression and punitive measures by local administrations and military authorities, further complicated the situation. This article examines the causes, initial manifestations, and characteristics of the 1916 uprising based on historical sources, archival documents, and modern historiography. The goal is to shed light on the uprising's initial stage within its legal, social, and political context and to clarify its place in the history of Turkestan.

Literature Review and Methodology

The colonial policy pursued by the Russian Empire deeply affected all aspects of life for the peoples of Turkestan. From the late 19th to early 20th century, the imperial authorities intensified land confiscation from locals to resettle Russian migrants. This resulted in economic decline and growing social discontent among the predominantly agrarian population. Additionally, local people were excluded from political rights and completely barred from state governance participation. The outbreak of World War I in 1914 further aggravated the socio-economic hardships of Turkestan's peoples.¹

The June 25, 1916 imperial decree escalated the situation to a breaking point. According to the decree, Muslim men aged 19 to 43 were to be conscripted for labor on the rear front. This provoked widespread opposition, particularly as conscription coincided with the critical agricultural harvest period and was implemented amid corruption and injustice by local officials.

The uprising began in Jizzakh on July 3, 1916, with peaceful protests violently suppressed. Soon, armed resistance erupted, involving attacks on tax offices and administrative buildings. The rebellion quickly spread to Syrdarya, Ferghana Valley, Kokand, Andijan, Namangan, Khujand, and other areas.² Though spontaneous in many locations, some parts of the uprising were led by local religious leaders, intellectuals, and former officials, reflecting the people's growing resolve to control their fate.

The rebels demanded the cessation of conscription, justice in local governance, and an end to exploitation. Despite being poorly armed, they showed courage and solidarity. The imperial government responded with brutal repression, resulting in thousands of deaths, destruction of villages, and mass displacement to Afghanistan and China. Participants were imprisoned and harshly punished, with the aim to suppress resistance and instill fear.

Importantly, the 1916 uprising symbolized not only social protest but also the awakening of national consciousness among Turkestan's peoples.³ Though uncoordinated centrally, the movement embodied the collective resistance against colonial rule and the rise of national awakening ideas.

Discussion and Conclusion

The 1916 uprising in Turkestan represents one of the largest and most significant anti-colonial movements in the Russian Empire. It reflected deep-seated grievances not only against conscription but also centuries of economic exploitation, political disenfranchisement, and national discrimination.

¹ Aminov R. — *History of the 1916 Popular Uprising*, Tashkent: Fan, 1986.

² Qayumov A. — *The Turkestan Revolt and Russian Colonialism*, Tashkent: Uzbekistan, 1995.

³ Bartold V.V. — *Essays on the History of Turkestan*, Tashkent: Sharq, 2000.

The rapid spread of the uprising reveals the systemic and long-standing nature of these issues. The movement manifested both as peaceful protests and armed resistance, demonstrating its broad social base, which included peasants, middle strata, religious leaders, intellectuals, and former officials.

The tragic consequences—mass killings, village destructions, and forced migrations—highlight the imperial authorities' ruthless repression, confirming the colonial nature of Russian policies in Turkestan.

In sum, the 1916 uprising marks a historical moment when the peoples of Turkestan increasingly asserted their national identity and aspiration for justice and freedom. Although ultimately suppressed, the uprising laid a critical foundation for subsequent national liberation and reform movements.

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