

THE POLICY OF FORCED LABOR IN TURKESTAN AND ITS SOCIAL
IMPACT (1916)

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Abstract:

This study examines the policy of forced labor introduced in Turkestan in 1916 and its profound social consequences for the indigenous population. Based on historical documents, including the proceedings of the State Duma and contemporary accounts, the research analyzes the legal, political, and socio-economic aspects of the mobilization decree issued on June 25, 1916. The study argues that the implementation of compulsory labor obligations violated the fundamental laws of the Russian Empire and ignored the economic conditions and social structure of the local population.

Keywords: Forced labor, Turkestan, 1916 uprising, Russian Empire, colonial policy, indigenous population, State Duma, mobilization decree, social unrest, administrative arbitrariness, legal violations, Central Asia, World War I, imperial governance, socio-economic impact.

The tragic events in Turkestan, associated with the introduction of compulsory labor obligations for the indigenous population of the region and resulting in tens of thousands of innocent victims, were not adequately covered in a timely manner. This was due to the fact that the old government imposed strict censorship on the Russian press, effectively enforcing silence on the issue. The attempts to shed light on this matter by members of the State Duma, such as Alexander Kerensky and Jafarov, also remained unknown to the public, as the government insisted that the issue be discussed behind closed doors. At present, as the Extraordinary Investigative Commission has begun examining the unlawful actions of former ministers, particular attention is being paid to determining the degree of culpability and illegality in the implementation of the decree issued by the former emperor on June 25, 1916, concerning the mobilization of indigenous populations for rear labor in support of the active army. Additionally, the preventive measures undertaken by deputies at the time are being reviewed. In this regard, it is of considerable interest to present the speeches delivered by Kerensky and Jafarov at the closed session of the State Duma on December 13, 1916, as they vividly illuminate these tragic events. Jafarov (representing the Baku, Elisavetpol, and Erivan provinces) addressed the assembly as follows: "Esteemed members of the State Duma, before proceeding with my speech, I must emphasize that we are discussing an important issue today in the absence of representatives from the regions directly affected by this matter. Such a situation is abnormal and cannot be tolerated further. I must also note that on the 27th of last month, during a session of the Commission on Military and Naval Affairs, I expressed my views on this issue in rather sharp terms. However, today, fearing that I may not be able to complete my speech in the same manner, I have confined myself within certain limits. Allow me, on behalf of the Muslim faction, to present our perspective on these events and to outline the causes and circumstances that gave rise to them. The decree published on July 6 marked an entirely new phase in the lives of the indigenous populations of Russia's eastern regions—namely the Caucasus, Turkestan, Siberia, and the Steppe territories. Hundreds of thousands of indigenous people, who had previously lived according to distinct economic systems and occupied a limited position within the state



structure, were directly drawn into the process of the Great World War. This development should have compelled the government to approach the issue of mass mobilization with particular caution and careful consideration. However, in practice, the opposite occurred: the conscription of indigenous populations was carried out in violation of the fundamental laws of the empire and implemented in a manner that caused severe and unjustified disruptions to the economic life of these communities. The unlawful actions of high-ranking authorities were accompanied by the unchecked arbitrariness of local administrative bodies. Both the decree itself and its implementation were contrary to the law. This was a direct result of a policy shaped over centuries—one that systematically ignored both the opinions and vital interests of the indigenous population. I will not dwell in detail on the legal aspects of this issue, as they have already been thoroughly outlined in our inquiry and distributed among you. I will only draw your attention to Article 71 of the Fundamental Laws, which states: “Russian subjects are obliged to pay taxes and duties established by law, and to fulfill obligations in accordance with legal provisions.” Article 86 further stipulates: “No new law may be enacted without the approval of the State Council and the State Duma, nor may it come into force without the sanction of the Emperor.” By requesting and implementing the decree of June 25, 1916, the Minister of War violated these fundamental provisions. Indeed, this decree imposed a new obligation upon regions inhabited by indigenous populations, whereas, according to Article 71, such obligations could only be established through proper legislative procedures. Furthermore, under Article 96, no such measure concerning general legislation could be enacted through military legal procedures. Irrespective of the foregoing, the Minister of Internal Affairs also exceeded his authority by independently ordering the immediate mobilization of the indigenous population without prior agreement with the Minister of War, despite the explicit requirement in the second section of the June 25 decree that such measures necessitated additional coordination with the War Ministry and the prior development of detailed regulations governing the mobilization process. Thus, in clear contradiction to the explicit meaning of the law, a new obligation was imposed upon the indigenous population, although such an obligation could only be established through legislative procedures. Moreover, this obligation, introduced in violation of the Fundamental Laws, was not even implemented in accordance with the requirements set forth in the decree itself. But was it deemed necessary to adhere to the law when it concerned so-called Kirghiz, Sarts, or Turkmens? For these “alien” peoples, it was as if the law did not apply. The abuse of authority became a fundamental principle of the Russian government’s policy toward indigenous populations: to mobilize them for labor, and that was all; and in the event of resistance, a vast administrative and police apparatus stood ready to enforce compliance. Without taking into account the economic diversity of various indigenous groups, and without considering the potential damage to both regional and overall national economies, the government implemented its measures in a rigid and unadapted manner, whereas such policies should have been tailored to the specific conditions of each locality. The documents at our disposal constitute, in essence, a cry of life itself, clearly demonstrating the economically detrimental consequences of the indiscriminate mobilization. Immediately after the decree on the conscription of indigenous populations was issued, numerous petitions and communications began to arrive from across the empire to the Ministries of Internal Affairs and War, requesting postponements and exemptions. A substantial portion of this material was also received by the Muslim faction. As is well known, the decree was issued at the height of the summer agricultural season. In the Steppe regions, a significant number of indigenous people were engaged in agricultural labor, both on their own lands and on those of the Russian population. In many instances, they performed this work voluntarily, out of solidarity with Russian settlers, and thus the issuance of the decree at such an inopportune moment forced members of the State Duma to take certain measures. At that time, we appealed



to the Ministry of War and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, pointing out the deficiencies in the procedures and methods of mobilizing indigenous populations for trench work, and we proposed the immediate development of clear and detailed regulations. However, our voice proved to be a voice crying in the wilderness. Warnings about possible unrest in Turkestan were also conveyed through telegrams sent by members of the Duma to the Chief of Staff of the Supreme Commander-in-Chief and to the Minister of War. Yet it was not only Turkestan that was shaken by the looming prospect of economic disruption. One may say that urgent telegrams were sent from virtually all corners of Russia. Petrograd was inundated with delegations from even the most remote regions. Individuals who had rarely, if ever, left their distant steppe homelands arrived in the capital in the hope of finding justice and mercy. Nevertheless, the authorities continued to act in a thoughtless and one-sided manner. Without dwelling on extensive citations from the documents available to us, it is evident that the decision to carry out the mass mobilization of indigenous populations failed to take into account the economic particularities of the regions, the living conditions of the people, and the role of local economies in maintaining the stability of the rear. As a result, instead of providing organized support to the front, the policy led in practice to the disorganization of the rear. This disruption was further exacerbated by a significant social characteristic of the indigenous population—namely, the position of women within society. Whereas in Russian peasant families women constituted an economic unit capable of replacing men conscripted into the army, among indigenous populations women, constrained by longstanding traditions that limited their interaction with the outside world, were unable to fulfill such a role. This crucial social factor was likewise overlooked by the central authorities. In sum, the decree on the mobilization of indigenous populations for trench labor was fraught with numerous failings: violations of fundamental laws, illogical measures, harmful rigidity, and economic unsoundness. All of these shortcomings were the product of a government detached from the realities of life, nurtured within the confines of bureaucratic offices, unaccountable to the people, and lacking reliance on the living forces of society. From such a government, it was difficult to expect wisdom or expediency in state policy. The decree on the mobilization of indigenous populations stands as a vivid example of such governance. Let us now move from a general assessment of central authority to an examination of how these measures were implemented at the local level. Before us lie two vast regions—Turkestan and the Steppe territories. Let us consider how the administrative machinery functioned once it was set in motion by directives from the center. Beginning with Turkestan, the regional administration, seeking to recruit laborers as quickly as possible, upon receiving the decree, instructed lower authorities to immediately compile lists of men between the ages of 19 and 31. At the same time, it did not consider it necessary to provide the indigenous population with a comprehensive preliminary explanation of the nature of the new obligations imposed upon them. Furthermore, the directive itself lacked clarity and precision. According to a petition submitted on August 15 by the residents of Samarkand to the Governor-General of Turkestan, under the order of Military Governor Lykoshin, they were required to submit within five days lists of men aged 19 to 31. The volost administrators and village elders began this work and, in some cases, had already completed it halfway when information arrived from Tashkent indicating that, at a meeting held on June 21, these lists were deemed unnecessary. Subsequently, in an announcement issued by the Samarkand military governor, it was stated that, in cooperation with district authorities and police officials, he had distributed the quota of military laborers assigned to the Samarkand region among its districts and cities, and that each urban and rural community was required, by formal resolution, to designate those who would be sent as laborers. “Previously, we were told,” wrote Khojaev, a fifty-year-old resident of Andijan in the Fergana region, in a letter to deputies Tevkelev and Kerensky, “that your sons would not be taken into the army; therefore, you must



willingly contribute horses and whatever else you can when requested by the authorities. Accordingly, we contributed money and goods to the best of our ability, and we even cultivated the lands of peasants who had gone to war.” However, it must be firmly emphasized that the administration consistently reinforced among the indigenous population the belief that they were exempt from personal participation in the war, especially when soliciting voluntary contributions for wartime needs. This confidence among the local population in their exemption from military service, and in the truthfulness of the administration’s assurances that “your sons will not be taken into the army,” was further reinforced by the law of April 19, 1915, according to which those segments of the population exempt from direct military service were instead required to pay an additional military tax. Ultimately, the indigenous population did not understand what was being required of them; they neither comprehended the purpose nor the nature of the newly imposed obligation. The local press, likely out of fear of military censorship, also failed to clarify the matter.

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