

## **Causes of the Urkun: The Genocide of 1916**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Tsarist Russia, entered the First World War on the side of the Entente Powers, suffered heavy losses in the western front. This was a result of issuing an Imperial Decree in 1916, to call about 500.000 recruits from the Muslim Turkish communities in Turkestan (Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Turkmen, Kazakh) who were treated until that time as second class citizens who were exempted from the military service. The Turkish people, discriminated for long in times of peace, refused to obey this appeal of the Russian Government. The response of the Russia government was harsh. The Russian government considered this rejection as rebellion to the government and mobilized her army to suppress Turkish people in Turkestan. Russian army implemented extreme measures and used extreme violence to the Turkish people. In other words, the Russian government under the pretext of this refusal started massacres against the Turkish people.

The refusal of the Turkish people to go the War especially to the front as labors became a pretext for the Russian government for anti-Turkish pogrom. This paper focuses on the causes of revolt. The reasons of Turkish struggle was against the Russian imperialism and discrimination of colonial administration in all sphere of life (social, cultural, economic, legal and administrative).

**Key words:** *Turkestan, Russia, Turkish, Urkun, Genocide, Colonialism, Imperialism.*

### **“Urkun”un Nedenleri: 1916 Soykırımı**

#### **ÖZET**

Rus Çarlığı, Birinci Dünya Savaşına İtilaf Devletleri safında giren Rus Çarlığı Batı cephesinde ciddi kayıplar vermişti. Bunun sonucunda 1916'da çıkarılan kararname ile o güne kadar ikinci sınıf vatandaş olarak görülen ve askerlik hizmetinden muaf tutulan Müslüman Türklerden (Kırgız, Özbek, Türkmen, Kazak) 500.000 kişi silah altına çağrıldı. Barış döneminde uzun zamandır farklı muamele gören Türkler, Rus hükümetinin bu çağrısını reddettiler. Bu itiraza Rus hükümetinin cevabı sert oldu. Bu itirazı bir isyan olarak Kabul ederek Türkistandaki Türkler üzerinde ordu baskısı oluşturdu. Rus ordusu burada olağandışı görülmemiş bir şiddet uyguladı. Başka bir ifadeyle bu bahaneyle Rus Hükümeti Türklere karşı bir katliama başladı.

Türklerin ön saflarda özellikle iş gücü olarak savaşa gitmeyi reddetmeleri Rus Hükümeti adına bir anti-Türk pogrom için bahane oldu. Bu çalışma, Türklerin Ruslara karşı geliş nedenlerini, her alandaki Ruslarla olan mücadelelerini ele almaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Türkistan, Rusya, Urkun, Genocide, Kolonicilik, Emperyalizm.*

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After military and diplomatic defeat in the Crimean War in 1853-1856, the Russian Tsarist Empire turned his attention to Turkestan and completed the necessary preparations for the conquest of the region till 1860. The period of imperialist and colonialist desires rising between 1860-1880, Russia began to attack Turkestan where nomadic tribes were living under three Khanates (Khiva, Bukhara and Khokand). The Khanate of Bukhara accepted Russian protectorate in 1868, the Khanate of Khiva came to end in 1873, the Khanate Khokand collapsed and disappeared in 1876. Turkmenistan was invaded in 1884. Three Khanates mentioned above were connecting to General Governor of Turkestan when the Kyrgyz, the Uzbeks, the Turkmen and the Kazakhs were involved into the colonial administration. However, because of the policies of this administration, there was atmosphere of distrust and dissatisfaction against the Russians.

*The Main Historical Reasons of Discontent in Turkestan can be summarized as follows:<sup>1</sup>*

1. *Reason:* No doubt, the main source and reason for dissatisfaction of Muslim Turkish people was the colonial administration, that is to say, was the presence of Russia as a colonizer in Turkestan. Colonialism means forming a political, military and economic domination on a land, a foreign state, a region, a country or a state that doesn't belong to oneself against the indigenous people by force. Muslim community in Turkestan had never been satisfied with the exploitation system established by the Russian government that they expressed themselves against policies of the government with time to time in the rebellion. Russia's suppressed these rebellions using "*disproportionate force*" in a bloody way increased further enmity and hatred of the Muslim population against the Russian government and Russians.

2. *Reason:* The second reason for dissents was settlements of Christian Russian migrating population, whose number was growing day by day and grasping fertile land such as Yedi-Su region belonging to Muslims and employing Russian immigrants as railroad workers. This created both religious and ethnic tension as well as concurrence and hostile situation between the Russians and the Turks.

Russian government didn't have a proper settlement planning. However, after the Russian immigrants started coming to the region created a chaos and disorder. To solve this problem in the region, Russian authorities when they settled the Russian immigrants to the fertile lands they drove out the Turkestani people away from these lands. This arousing indignation and resentment among Muslims and caused a revolt led by Dukchi İshan in Andijan in 1898. This rebellion against the colonial Russian administration as a reaction was suppressed with bloodshed within a short period of time. Many villages were emptied and some of these villages Russian immigrants were settled. The memories of the massacre and disaster haven't been forgotten.

3. *Reason:* Owing to events in Turkestan happened at the beginning of the XX century, Russian colonization reached the heights which would drive to a general revolt. The Russian authorities armed the workers and immigrants from Russia against this dangerous situation. They were going to protect both themselves and the existing order. This policy of Russia created anxiety and fear among Muslim people in the region.

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<sup>1</sup>For more information you can refer: Kuşbek, *Üsenbaev, Vosstaniye 1916 goda v Kirgizii*, Frunze, 1967

4. *Reason:* Again, the Russians administration in Turkestan through a small number of military and civilian bureaucrats under heavy military measures is among one of the main reasons why local Muslim people revolted. Russian officials' resorting to violence, taking a bribe, robbing local people, treating indigenous people as second-class citizens produced a hidden and permanent psychological hostility of Muslims against Christian Russians.

5. *Reason (Economic reasons):* In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Turkestani people were generally nomads, semi-nomads and peasants who lived in medieval conditions keeping livestocks, besides, they were poor people with high national pride and religious feelings.

They were living in four different places, with their livestock in spring, summer, autumn, and winter in a year. This was very important and indispensable tradition of nomadism. Due to the arrival of Russians, this tradition was difficult to be continued. In fact, some part of the fertile lands, yaylaks (pasture land where people live in summer and keep their livestock) and kyshlaks (the place where people live in winter) were confiscated. Moreover, a new tax was imposed on nomadic people such as the tax called feld-tent. This tax was heavy burden on the Turkestani people to be paid because the people paid twice to both Manaps who were appointed by the Russian government and *General Governor of Turkistan* collected it.

After establishing the colonial administration in Turkestan, Russia began to consider this region as a market and warehouse of raw materials. For this purpose, they forced people to produce cotton instead of traditional agricultural productions. Thus, cotton production in Turkestan turned to be the only production and work offer in which all villagers were engaged. However, as production of cotton was growing, the cotton prices were decreasing dramatically. In consequence, the cotton exported to Russia in low price. But turned back to Turkestan as a manufactured textile production and resold to the Muslims at high prices.<sup>2</sup> Economically, this situation led Turkestani people much poorer than they were before and it was a disaster for them. When impoverished people began to sell their land, the number of landless peasants grew. This colonial exploitation system, increasing hatred of Muslims towards Christian Russians, set the stage for the rebellion in 1916 along with other reasons.

6. *Reason (Influence of Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism):* Number of Turkish intellectuals living Tsarist Russia who have national consciousness saw independence as the only way to salvation of Turkish people. This idea was spread by teachers, merchants, and politicians as rights of culture and education. Especially after 1905, schools and newspapers were used as a way to disseminate this idea. The leading figures of Turkish Union were *Ismail Gaspirali* who said "*Unity of language, idea and work*" , *Yusuf Akchura* with his work on "*Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset (Three Policies)*", *Ali Huseyinzade* from Azerbaijan and *Ahmet Agaoglu* who were seeking salvation from unity of Turkish people.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hamit Ziyayev, *Struggle in Turkestan against Russian Rule*, Ankara 2007, press TTK , p.357

<sup>3</sup> Nadir Devlet, *The History of National Struggle of the Russian Turks (1905-1917)*, , publication TTK , Ankara, 1985, p.149-160

Developing parallel to Pan-Turkism, Pan-Islamism which also includes Turkish unity attracted many Turkish intellectuals. Islamist intellectuals were trying to turn the Muslim people back on Russia and considered Russian Tsarist Empire as an obstacle to implementing their idea. They wanted to freed from the Russian Empire and established their united Islamic state with the help of the Ottoman Empire. For this purpose, they continued propaganda among Muslim people against the Russian government and Christian Russians in Turkestan verbally.<sup>4</sup>

In short, Russia endeavored to hinder religious, social and cultural activities of Muslim Turkish people and pressured on intellectuals, schools, teachers, newspapers, magazines, the Muslim clergy through the police to prevent the spread of ideas like Pan-Turkic, Pan-Islamist considered them to be dangerous. These kinds of pressures continued till 1916, but, it caused the explosion of the rebellion and further strengthening of national and religious consciousness by provoking a reverse reaction.

7. *Reason:* Russian Empire began to russificate the indigenous people while settling Russian origin inhabitants to Turkestan. The first step, they were opened Russian schools (Tüzem schools) and admitted Muslim's children to these schools and began teaching them in the Russian language. The most important tools of Russification policy was Russian language.

*Against background in 1916 the recruitment order came to spark a regional wide rebellion.*

Due to the reasons explained above, relations between the Turks and the Russians and the Russian colonial administration were tense until the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Despite when war began the Turkestani people demonstrated commitment to the Russian government. For some of Turkish intellectuals the First World War was indispensable opportunity to get rid of from the Russian colonial administration. But because of the war, industrial production in Russia collapsed, agricultural production decreased, and trade came to the point of disappearing and imports completely stopped. Prices roses and taxes were increased. To meet the needs of the war, horses, camels, sheep, food and money collected from the people of Turkestan by force. Economy collapsed in the region which caused the rise of social unrest and famine. This situation provoked revolting attitudes and resentment of Muslims against Russia.

The early years of the war (1915 and 1916) Russia due to heavy defeats in western front suffered heavy military casualties. Due to this event, Tsar wanted to recruit men between the ages of 19-43 from Turkestan to compensate Russian losses. For this purpose, issuing a decree on June 25, 1916, the Tsar ordered to call of recruits from Turkestan to work for constructions, trenches and bridges, who were exempted from military service until that time. Turkestani people opposed to this order. The leaders of Turkestan demanded Tsar the followings:<sup>5</sup> to give equal rights to the Turks and the Russians, to stop settlement of Russians and to put to end the practices of Russification in Turkestan.

As a result, with a combination of these fundamental and apparent reasons, Russia's repressive, military colonial administration exhausted patient of the people of

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<sup>4</sup> Op.cit.

<sup>5</sup> Ebubekir Güngör, *Tendency of Opinion in Turkestan during Tsarism* (Master's thesis), Bişkek, 2008, p.160-163.

Turkestan to the Russian government and Russian settlers and led to prompt the Turkestani people's rebellion in 1916. In this rebellion named by the Kyrgyz as "Uluu Urkun"<sup>6</sup> (The Great Escape), the Russian émigrés (Russian peasants and workers) were armed and General Kuropatkin gave order suppressed the rebellion. In his order, General told his special forces (called punishment troops) "*don't begrudge any bullets, killed all insurgents, confiscate their livestock and lands*". After this order, Kuropatkin's soldiers to the attempt suppressing especially Kyrgyz and the Kazaks in the Yedi-Su region committed '*genocide*' in the full sense of the word.

The Russian army and armed Russian settlers massacred approximately 30 000 Kyrgyz alone, exiled 200,000 Kyrgyz to Siberia, 300.000 Kyrgyz fled to the East Turkestan. Only 347 Kyrgyz lost their life in front of Russian fire squads. For us, the reason for all these events, as Lenin also pointed out, Turkestan was literally "a real colony"<sup>8</sup> (Koloniey çisteýşego tıpa").

Summarily, this struggle for Turks in Turkestan was a national survival and independence struggle. Same time this struggle was against imperialism, colonialism, injustice, Russification, settling Russian immigrants to Turkestan.

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<sup>6</sup> Füsün Kara, "1916 Kırgız Büyük İsyanı: Ürkün", *Turkish Studies - International Periodical For The Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic*, Volume 6/2 Spring 2011, p. 537-546, Turkey.

<sup>7</sup> Adil Hikmet Bey, *Aşyada Beş Türk*, İstanbul 1998, s.15.

<sup>8</sup> V..İ.Lenin, *Polnoye Sobraniye Soçineniy*, cilt: 30, s.35.

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