

**RESISTANCE TO COLONIAL POLICY: THE 1916 TURKESTAN UPRISING BASED  
ON NEW RESEARCH**

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**Abstract:** This article approaches the 1916 popular movement in Turkestan from the perspective of modern historiography, reanalyzing its regional, political, and social significance. The author interprets this movement not merely as a spontaneous revolt, but as a historical expression of public dissatisfaction with colonial policies and an important stage of national awakening. While Soviet historiography viewed the event through the lens of class struggle, post-independence scholarship reconsiders it as a national liberation movement. The article explains the roots of the popular movement in factors such as social injustice, political oppression, and economic exploitation. It also analyzes the consequences of the uprising, including demographic losses, mass killings, deportations, displacement, and famine. Attention is given to some scholars' application of the term "genocide." The article emphasizes the need to reassess historical events free from political and ideological influence, framing the movement as part of a broader effort to restore historical memory and national identity. Thus, the 1916 uprising is presented as a courageous struggle of the peoples of Turkestan in pursuit of freedom.

**Keywords:** 1916 uprising, popular movement, colonialism, national liberation struggle, historical memory, genocide, Soviet historiography, demographic losses, political oppression, historical interpretation, Central Asia, national awakening.

**Introduction.** The 1916 popular movement in Turkestan stands as one of the most significant historical events in the history of Central Asia, closely associated with complex social, political, and cultural processes. This movement represented a major outburst of public discontent accumulated in the social consciousness of the local population, openly expressing opposition to the colonial policies carried out by the Russian Empire over many years. Although official historical documents and contemporary sources often described the movement as a "rebellion," a "spontaneous uprising," or "local disorder," interpreting it merely as such is inadequate. In reality, the movement was a clear expression of public protest against long-standing social injustice, economic exploitation, national discrimination, and political oppression. The decree issued by the Russian Empire in 1916, known as the "mobilization order" — which called for the conscription of local male populations from Turkestan and other peripheral regions to serve in labor battalions on the rear fronts of World War I — significantly intensified the already growing discontent among the people. This decree was seen as a violation of the local communities' social, cultural, and religious values, and was perceived as forcing them to sacrifice themselves for the interests of the Russian Empire. Especially for peasants, herders, artisans, and other working-class people who had lived independently on their lands for centuries, the decree

represented not only economic but also moral oppression. In essence, the Turkestan popular movement was driven not only by social or economic factors but also by deep national-liberation aspirations. Participants included representatives of various social strata — peasants, artisans, religious scholars, and even some members of the local intelligentsia. They fought for the honor and freedom of their homeland, to preserve their identity, and to secure justice and liberty for future generations. The movement spread across many regions of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, demonstrating that it was not a localized uprising limited to one group or region, but rather a broad expression of collective dissatisfaction throughout the Turkestan region. Throughout history, the approach to the Turkestan popular movement has varied. During the Soviet era, it was interpreted within the framework of class struggle, portrayed as a conflict between local exploiting classes and the Russian Empire. In this view, the people's national liberation aspirations were either ignored or deliberately denied. However, after Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other Central Asian states gained independence, attitudes toward this historical event changed drastically. Modern historians now interpret the movement as a national liberation struggle against colonial policies, striving to uncover its true nature.

Recent scholarly research based on archival documents and the memories of local witnesses has contributed to a fuller understanding of the movement's complexity, scope, and the deep impression it left on the consciousness of the people. In this process, it is essential not only to restore historical truth but also to acknowledge and honor our people's courageous struggle for freedom and justice.

**Main Body.** The 1916 Turkestan People's Movement was not merely a local event, but a large-scale wave of resistance shaped against colonial policies in the region. Its roots lie in past social injustices, political oppression, and economic exploitation.[1] This movement, by its nature, scope of interpretation, and historical evaluation, remains a subject of ongoing debate among scholars and the public. During the Soviet historiographical period, this movement was primarily viewed through the lens of class struggle. Its national-liberation essence, however, remained largely unexpressed until more recent times. Nevertheless, some scholars striving to reveal historical truth have described this process not only as a struggle against exploitation, but also as a significant stage in the awakening of national identity. In the post-independence period, a new approach to the 1916 movement has emerged in the historiography of Central Asian states, especially in Kazakhstan and Turkestan.[2] In scholarly literature, this event is increasingly seen as a national liberation war, and at times, as a revolutionary movement. For example, academician M. Qoziboyev refers to this movement as "a revolution against colonialism in the East." According to him, the events of 1916 represented the collapse of imperial policy and a step towards national awakening and political transformation.[3] Other researchers interpret the movement as a national uprising that contributed to the restoration of traditional state institutions and the formation of economic and political alternatives. It should be noted that these various perspectives shape different understandings of the movement's actual dynamics, as historical sources and figures reveal the complexity of the events.

In addition, the issue of the casualties among Turkestan peoples during the movement has also become a subject of wide discussion. Some sources note that over 100,000 people lost their lives,

while other studies claim the number may have reached between 150,000 and 300,000.[7] Demographic losses, mass displacement, famine, and disease—all these consequences were closely linked to the brutal suppression of the movement. In particular, in post-Soviet historiography, the issue of "genocide"[6] raised by historians makes the topic even more pressing. It is increasingly argued that the movement may have involved not only political suppression but also elements of ethnic cleansing.[4]

Another significant issue is the potential influence of external forces in the outbreak of the revolt. Some researchers have noted that German or Ottoman intelligence and propaganda were active in Turkestan and that their religious and political appeals intensified public discontent.[5] However, existing sources are insufficient to draw firm conclusions in this regard. Credible evidence suggests that the movement primarily emerged as a result of internal social, economic, and political pressures. Moreover, the events of 1916 are now being re-evaluated not just as a "revolt," but as a phenomenon that contributed to the formation of national identity, historical memory, and political maturity in the region.[2]

One of the most important tasks for contemporary historiography is to re-examine the essence of the 1916 Turkestan People's Movement free from political and ideological biases. The movement should not be interpreted as a "spontaneous uprising," but rather as an eruption of historical discontent deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the people. It emerged in response to the intensification of Tsarist Russia's exploitative policies, particularly issues related to land, tax burdens, and the mobilization decree.[3]

Today, reassessing historical truth is not only a scholarly obligation but also a cultural and moral responsibility. The mass massacres, deportations, famine, and disease that occurred during the 1916 movement left a deep and lasting impact on the history of our people.[1] The deaths of countless individuals, the disintegration of families, and the rupture of cultural memory must be given special attention in current historical analysis.

Furthermore, viewing the movement not merely as a local expression of dissent, but as an integral part of a broader regional awakening and political formation, helps to restore its true historical significance. The 1916 Turkestan People's Movement was a struggle for freedom, dignity, and life by an entire nation. To assess it solely through the lens of class struggle or foreign provocation is a one-sided approach to history. This movement is an inseparable part of national memory and represents the historical courage of our people in their fight against colonial oppression.

Future historical research must deeply analyze the social, demographic, political, and cultural consequences of this movement, serving as an important step toward illuminating the difficult path of the Turkestan peoples in their pursuit of freedom.

**Conclusion.** The 1916 Turkestan People's Movement was not merely a temporary protest born out of the socio-economic and political crises of its time, but rather one of the most vivid and significant expressions of the people's centuries-long aspiration for national and human freedom. In its essence, causes, and consequences, this movement left a profound mark on the history of

our people and holds historical value as a form of national resistance against colonial oppression. The roots of the movement lie in the Russian Empire's long-standing policies of economic exploitation, political discrimination, and disregard for the customs, religious beliefs, and social values of the local population. The wide scale and intensity of the movement demonstrate that it was not confined to one or two regions but emerged as a nationwide uprising throughout Turkestan. Among those who took part were peasants, artisans, herders, religious scholars, and even some local intellectuals, confirming the movement's broad and diverse social base. Despite lacking any organized political support or military strength, they fought for their freedom, dignity, and future. The armed clashes, mass casualties, the deaths of thousands of innocent people, and the forced displacement of many families—all of these events, though tragic, reflect our people's unwavering desire for independence and liberty.

During the Soviet era, these events were interpreted through the lens of official ideology, often reduced to a class struggle while ignoring their nature as a national liberation movement. This approach led to a distortion of historical truth in the public consciousness. However, in the post-independence period—especially with the development of national historiographies in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and other regional states—this movement has begun to be reevaluated from a new and more just perspective. Today, the 1916 Turkestan People's Movement is being rediscovered as an integral part of national self-awareness, political awakening, and the broader struggle for freedom. Moreover, the tragedies that occurred during this movement—including mass killings, refugee crises, and acts of genocide against the population—now necessitate the restoration of historical truth, the honoring of the memory of the victims, and the establishment of historical justice. This event should serve not only as a historical fact illuminating the past but also as a source of inspiration in our people's ongoing pursuit of freedom, justice, and national unity.

Thus, the 1916 people's movement holds great importance for us—not only as a lesson from the past but also as a historical experience that guides our future. It serves as a solid foundation for preserving historical memory, fostering national pride and identity, and strengthening the struggle for justice and truth.

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