

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN TURKESTAN (1917–1920) THE EVOLUTION OF THE SCHOOL SYSTEM AND THE FORMATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

This article analyzes the profound political, social, and cultural transformations that occurred in the Turkestan region between 1917 and 1920, focusing specifically on the structural transition from traditional scholastic schooling to a contemporary secular educational framework. The study examines the ideological interplay and conflict between the educational initiatives of the national intelligentsia (the Jadids) and the subsequent centralization and ideological nationalization policies implemented by the Soviet regime. Particular attention is given to the institutional shifts within the school system, notably the methodology of the Usul-i Savtiya (New Method) schools, and the challenges of training national pedagogical cadres through early institutional structures such as Dar al-Muallimin. Furthermore, the article traces the dual-phase genesis of higher education in the region, starting from the community-driven "Turkestan Muslim People's University" in 1918 to the formal establishment of the Turkestan State University in 1920. Utilizing historical-comparative analysis, the paper demonstrates how the complex socio-political conditions of this transitional period laid the foundational bedrock for the modern scientific and pedagogical infrastructure across contemporary Central Asia.

Keywords: Turkestan, cultural transformations, Jadidism, New Method schools, higher education, Turkestan State University, educational reform.

The political upheavals of the February and October Revolutions in 1917 fundamentally altered the trajectory of centuries-old traditional cultural development in the Turkestan region. Following the collapse of the Tsarist Russian colonial regime, the processes of national self-awareness and cultural renewal accelerated. The defining characteristic of the cultural context during this period was the prioritization of raising societal literacy levels and adapting the educational system to contemporary demands. Two primary forces, ideologically opposed yet equally determined, operated within the cultural and educational arena of the region.

The first direction was driven by the Turkestan intelligentsia, specifically the representatives of the Jadidist movement. Enlighteners such as Munawwar Qari Abdurashidkhanov, Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy, and Abdulla Avloni viewed school reform as the cornerstone of cultural development. They argued that Muslim society could not achieve political and economic independence without mastering secular sciences. The Jadids' cultural program was not limited to basic literacy; it encompassed a broad spectrum of reforms, including the development of theater arts, the establishment of a national press (newspapers and magazines), and sending youth abroad for higher education. Their objective was to integrate European scientific achievements into Turkestan society while preserving national and religious values.

The second direction was intertwined with the ideological policies of the Soviet government, which seized power in Turkestan in late 1917. The Bolsheviks sought to exploit the region's cultural chaos and the widespread illiteracy of the population for their own benefit. For the Soviet regime, the education system was viewed not merely as an enlightening tool, but as a mechanism for forging a new Communist ideology and promoting class struggle. The newly established People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros) endeavored to centralize all cultural and educational institutions in the region and completely eliminate religious influence from them. An intense internal struggle persisted between the cultural concepts of these two forces. Between 1917 and 1920, the Jadids utilized their educational expertise within Soviet structures (various committees and commissions) to actively preserve and expand the network of national schools. However, the Soviet government's cultural policy gradually adopted a totalitarian character, restricting the independent educational initiatives of the national intelligentsia. This ultimately channeled the subsequent direction of cultural development in Turkestan into a standardized Soviet ideological framework.

Between 1917 and 1920, the education system in the Turkestan region underwent a process of intense struggle and transformation between traditional religious structures and contemporary secular directions. The educational legacy inherited from the Tsarist Russian era possessed a dual character: on one hand, conservative schools (maktab) and madrasahs operated, while on the other, Russo-native schools established by the colonial administration were functional. However, this system was inadequate for ensuring mass literacy among the region's population or responding to the demands of the era. This factor necessitated the creation of a new network of schools within the region.

The first major transformation during this period was the development of the Usul-i Saviya (New Method) schools founded by the Jadids, which reached its zenith. The New Method schools abandoned traditional scholastic teaching practices and introduced phonetic-based literacy training. This method enabled children to acquire reading and writing skills within a short timeframe. Alongside religious subjects, secular disciplines such as geography, history, arithmetic, and natural sciences were integrated into the curriculum. The organizers attached particular importance to achieving literacy in the native language. Between 1917 and 1918, the national intelligentsia initiated the publication of methodologically updated textbooks tailored for these schools.

In the subsequent stage, beginning in 1918, the establishment of the government of the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR) initiated a process of continuous nationalization of the school system along the Soviet model. In accordance with decrees enacted by the Soviet government, the educational system was brought entirely under state control, and schools were separated from religion, churches, and mosques. The material and technical infrastructure, as well as the waqf (endowment) properties of traditional maktab and madrasahs, were repurposed as instruments of state transformation. On their foundation, new Soviet schools known as the "Unified Labor School" (Edinaya trudovaya shkola) were organized. Education was declared free, compulsory, and coeducational for both males and females.

The implementation of these transformations encountered two major challenges in the region. The first was the acute shortage of national teaching cadres capable of instructing secular disciplines. To address this issue, short-term teacher training courses and the earliest pedagogical institutional structures, such as Dar al-Muallimin (Men's Pedagogical Institute) and Dar al-Muallimat (Women's Pedagogical Institute), were established in cities such as Tashkent, Samarkand, and Fergana. The second challenge was the intensification of ideological pressure. The

Soviet government transformed schools not merely into centers of literacy, but into hubs for communist indoctrination and the dissemination of class struggle ideas. This dynamic ultimately led to the erasure of the distinct cultural characteristics of national schools and the standardization (unification) of education into a singular Soviet framework.

The period between 1917 and 1920 holds a paramount historical significance in the history of the Turkestan region, as it marked the inception of the higher education system and the initial formation of a national stratum of scientific cadres. This process developed in parallel with the political transformations occurring within the region, unfolding through a complex interplay between the national aspirations of the intelligentsia and the state-strategic interests of the Soviet government. The initiative to establish an institution of higher education in Turkestan initially emerged as a purely national concept and subsequently progressed into a major state-sponsored project.

The initial phase of the formation of higher education traces back to the spring of 1918. Led by Munawwar Qari Abdurashidkhanov, the Turkestan intelligentsia organized an educational structure in Tashkent named the "Turkestan Muslim People's University" (referred to in certain sources as the Turkestan People's University) with the objective of elevating the scientific and cultural standards of the region's population. This initiative represented the earliest endeavor in the history of Turkestan aimed at providing secular higher education specifically for the local population. Evening courses, short-term pedagogical seminars, and lectures in fields such as natural sciences, history, and literature were organized under the auspices of the university. The defining characteristic of this institution was that instruction was conducted in languages accessible to the local population, and its curriculum was specifically designed for training national cadres.

In the subsequent phase, by 1919–1920, this process expanded to a comprehensive state scale. The Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR enacted a specific decree to establish a fully-fledged state university in Tashkent, aiming to create a major scientific and ideological center in the Turkestan region. As a result of this strategic decision, the Turkestan State University officially commenced its operations in September 1920. To equip the university with material-technical infrastructure and academic staff, special scientific expedition trains were organized from major Russian cultural centers, including Moscow and Petrograd. Through these trains, substantial collections of prominent scientific libraries, laboratory equipment, research collections, and leading Russian scholars (such as D.N. Kashkarov, A.L. Brodsky, and E.P. Korovin) were transported to Tashkent.

Faculties of medicine, physics and mathematics, history and philology, and engineering and reclamation began operations within the university structure. Furthermore, a special "Workers' Faculty" (rabfak) was established to integrate representatives of the local population into higher education and prepare them for standard university courses. The opening of Turkestan State University not only institutionalized the educational process but also turned the university into the primary center for the scientific study of the region's natural resources, geography, history, and ethnography. In subsequent years, this academic institution served as the foundational bedrock for training highly educated intellectuals, educators, and scientists across the entire Central Asian region.

A scientific analysis of the cultural transformations, school system reforms, and the formation of the higher education process in Turkestan between 1917 and 1920 allows for the following conclusions to be drawn:

Firstly, this period marked a fundamental turning point in the history of the region, characterized by the transition from traditional religious-scholastic education to a contemporary secular system. The political upheavals brought about by the February and October Revolutions mobilized the cultural strata of society and placed the issue of mass literacy at the forefront of the public agenda.

Secondly, the transformation within the school system developed under the ideological conflict between two distinct forces: the national intelligentsia (the Jadids) and the Soviet government. The Jadids' "New Method" schools established an effective methodological framework for teaching secular sciences in the native language. Although the subsequent complete nationalization and unification of schools by the Soviet government ensured that education became mass-oriented and free of charge, it also subjected the educational system to a strict class-based and ideological framework.

Thirdly, the formation of the higher education system in Turkestan initially commenced as a national initiative via the "Turkestan Muslim People's University," which ultimately culminated in a major state project by 1920 the establishment of the Turkestan State University. Supported by academic cadres and a material-technical base transferred from major scientific centers, this university rapidly ensured the elevation of science and scholarship to a professional level within the region.

In conclusion, despite the complex political and social conditions between 1917 and 1920, the foundations of the contemporary school and higher education systems were established in Turkestan. This, in turn, served as the primary historical bedrock for the emergence of a professional stratum of scientific and pedagogical cadres, as well as the subsequent development of educational networks across the contemporary Central Asian region, including Uzbekistan.

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