HAL open science

Turkestan

Cloé Drieu

To cite this version:

Cloé Drieu. Turkestan. 2016. halshs-01762304

HAL Id: halshs-01762304

https://shs.hal.science/halshs-01762304

Submitted on 9 Apr 2018

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

1914 1918 ONLINE International Encyclopedia of the First World War

Version 1.0 | Last updated 20 January 2016

Turkestan

By Cloé Drieu

The province of Turkestan - modern-day Central Asia -, a Russian military colony since 1865-1875, truly entered WWI in 1916, when Tsar Nicholas II and his military staff decided, on 7 July (Gregorian calendar), to conscript a new labour force from the Muslims of Central Asia, who had not been drafted before, to serve in the rear of the Russian army. The imperial decree triggered uprisings over the region: the revolts lasted several weeks in the sedentary parts of the region and several months in the nomadic areas (especially in the south, in Semirechie). The consequences were drastic and put the province in a catastrophic situation, on the eve of the October revolution, and later the civil war.

Table of Contents

1 The Beginning of the War (1914-1916)

2 The Imperial Decree of Conscription

3 The 1916 Uprisings in the Sedentary Area (July-August)

4 Revolts in Nomadic Areas: The case of Semirechie

5 Conclusion

Notes

Selected Bibliography

Citation

The Beginning of the War (1914-1916)

After the general mobilisation of the Russian Empire in July-August 1914, conscripting 15 million men, Turkestan went through important demographic and economic changes that had consequences for everyday life and for the way the uprisings began and developed. First, even though the native population in Turkestan did not serve in the ranks of the army, they had to provide

the Russian state with cotton, raw materials, horses, camels, and cattle, and indeed had to performed war duty. Second, the situation had, since the early days of the war, given birth to massive migrations that affected the province. On the one hand, males from the Russian settler population and the Cossacks were conscripted and had to leave the region for the front in large numbers. From a demographic viewpoint, their rapid withdrawal destabilised the population distribution (in the Semirechie region, the most fertile lands of the southern Central Asian region, up to 50 percent of the settlers left).[1] On the other hand, flows of refugees from the Central European parts of the Russian Empire arrived in Turkestan, along with prisoners of war, mainly of German and Austrian origin (about 200,000).

The Imperial Decree of Conscription

In the summer of 1915, the Russian army faced great difficulties and the drafting of the Central Asian Muslim population by imperial decree was later decided in order to fulfil the military needs. The Russian minister of war stated that his army needed up to 500,000 men monthly.[2] The issue of drafting the Central Asian population was raised, but only for labour battalions. The imperial decree of Nicholas II, Emperor of Russia (1868-1918) was issued on 7 July 1916 and was aimed at drafting 250,000 men aged between nineteen and forty-three years of age. Then, the imperial administration in Turkestan had to decide precisely how many men they could provide; eventually, the native administration had to choose, namely, which men would go. The decree was announced, without preparation, during the high season of agricultural work and during the period of Ramadan, which raised discontent and concern. Rumours were also circulating, as some feared being Christianised in the ranks of the army.[3] Moreover, since there were no birth certificates, determining age was often difficult, and led to the practice of corruption, bribes and exemptions.

The 1916 Uprisings in the Sedentary Area (July-August)

In the sedentary areas, the colonial native administration, which had significant power, was a target of violence. The former governor of Turkestan Aleksei Kuropatkin (1848-1925)[4] underlined that, in fact, the native administration regulated the main areas of the region almost independently, while the Russian administration was considered incompetent and undersized.[5] The strongest outburst of violence occurred in Jizakh (near Samarkand), a mixed area of crop production and nomadic cattle breeding. Here, but also more generally speaking all over the sedentary areas, the revolt began when the *ellikboshi* (the lower grade of the native administration) started compiling the names of those men who had to serve on labour battalions. In Jizakh, the mob first murdered the *ellikboshi* and then Russian officials (one colonel and some members of the police staff). It was involved, too, in substantial material damage (transport and communications, administrative and private buildings, etc.). This destruction temporarily cut off the area of Jizakh from the rest of the Russian imperial territory and authority, and gave rise to the self-proclamation of local chiefs (*bek*). In late July, the sedentary regions of Turkestan were largely affected by the uprisings. Martial law was declared on

30 July, which had a negative effect on economic activities, and gave the authorities the right to deport the population elsewhere within the empire or to execute them on the spot. Thirteen companies of cavalry (including Cossacks), infantry and artillery were involved in the “pacification,” which ended in early August. As a result of sanctions, in Jizakh, a perimeter of five kilometers around the place where the Russian colonel had been killed was razed to the ground; and a large amount of land was also seized.[6] As a tool of repression, the crops were taken away and the fields burned. The order was followed, but postponed to 15 September, after the cotton harvest. In the sedentary areas, the religious factor was not relevant, except for some cases with a call to “holy war” (*ghazavat*),[7] as in Jizakh, Kokand, Andijan and Namangan. However, neither the Islamic nor the national factor should be overestimated.[8]

Revolts in Nomadic Areas: The case of Semirechie

Longer and more violent than those in the sedentary areas, the uprisings in the nomadic parts of Turkestan, particularly those in the south (Semirechie), turned into a more prolonged colonial war. At the beginning, the situation was almost the same as in the sedentary regions (lack of preparation for mobilization, problems of translation, corruption, anger against the Russian and native administrations), but the revolts developed there in a different way. There were many causes for this: the low number of administrative and military forces on the spot, the lack of a network of railway transport and the mobility of nomadic populations that slowed down the process of repression and, last but not least, the huge proportion of Russian and Ukrainian settlers who had arrived there since 1905. Indeed, the region contained 240,000 settlers (out of 500,000 in Central Asia), that is, 22.8 percent of the total population.[9] In consequence, the nomadic population suffered less and less access to their traditional grazing lands and watering points.

Nevertheless, it seems that the contestation did not become violent as rapidly as in the sedentary regions. For about one month, traditional local chiefs or members of the indigenous administration addressed requests and petitions for the decree to be explained, prepared and postponed. People began, also, to peacefully flee with their cattle toward the borders of China, while others gathered into bands, sometimes of up to 15,000 men,[10] and attacked, plundered and murdered the male settlers, while women (often raped, converted to Islam and married) and children were taken as prisoners. The discontent and disorder grew in August. Russian military forces and Cossacks, including squadrons from Orenburg, repressed the population relatively easily in the north of modern Kazakhstan, but in the south (Semirechie), the violence lasted until at least January 1917. There, the repression was undertaken with considerable delay. As a solution, Kuropatkin proposed to establish two ethnically segregated districts: one exclusively Russian, in the Przhevalsk area (200,000 natives were to be expelled), and another, ethnically Kirghiz, in Naryn, where 50,000 people would be displaced.[11] The project was accepted in October 1916 but was not implemented due to the political situation in Russia in 1917 and, later, the civil war.

Conclusion

Summing up the revolts is not easy. If their duration was roughly that of the Battle of the Somme, the casualties incurred in Central Asia were far from the ones on the European fronts: overall less than 5,000 persons died in the ranks of the imperial Russian and native administrations and among the settlers.[12] However, the number of casualties was much greater than that which occurred during the entire colonial conquest of Turkestan by the Russian military forces.[13] As far as the natives were concerned, in Semirechie – the region which suffered the most – the indigenous population has declined by 273,000 people (53,000 deaths and 220,000 migrants). With the deaths caused by migration to China, the loss of the native population would reach 29 percent, in some districts almost 70 percent.[14] Moreover, the exodus to China caused the loss of almost all the livestock and property of the migrants; they lived there in extreme poverty and in harsh conditions. To cap it all, we should add important material damages (post, telegraph, railroad), considerable loss of crops, and the total destruction of economy and loss of labour. And, notwithstanding the resistance, the Russian army still managed to conscript 123,000 Central Asians in labour battalions, which worked in different parts of the Russian Empire (Turkestan, the Caucasus, Ukraine, Russia).[15] The repression of the revolts was far from being the end of a logic of violence but was, rather, a starting point. The civil war, Stalinism and World War II offered a steady example of a continuum of destruction[16] that would only end in the 1950s with Destalinisation.

Cloé Drieu, Centre national de la recherche scientifique

Section Editors: Yulia Khmelevskaya; Katja Bruisch; Oksana Nagornaja; Olga Nikonova

Notes

1. ↑ The region had 240,000 settlers (out of 500,000 in all of Turkestan), i.e. 22.8 percent of the total population. See: Khabib, Tursunov: Vosstanie 1916 goda v Sredeni Azii i Kazakhstana [The Revolt of 1916 in Central Asia and Kazakhstan], Tashkent 1962, p. 76.
2. ↑ Journal of Aleksei Kuropatkin edited by Petr Galuzo, Vosstanie 1916 goda v Srednei Azii, in: Krasnyi Arkhiv, 34/3 (1929), p. 48.
3. ↑ Uzbek State National Archive I-1/31/1100, p. 273: Aleksei Kerensky's (1881-1970) speech at the Duma on 13 December 1916).
4. ↑ Aleksei Kuropatkin participated in the conquest of Turkestan. He was minister of war (1898-1905) and served on different fronts during WWI. He was named governor of Turkestan in July 1916.
5. ↑ Journal of A. Kuropatkin, ed. by Galuzo, Vosstanie 1916, p. 46.
6. ↑ About 2,000 hectare. See: Sokol, Edward, D.: The Revolt of 1916 in Russian Central Asia, Baltimore 1954, p. 155.

7. ↑ The term *jihad* was not used at that time. It seems that it appeared (along with *mujahed*) with the presence in Central Asia of Ismail *Enver* Pasha (1881-1922), the former Ottoman minister of war.
8. ↑ As underlined by one important witness and politician, Grigorii, Broido: Materialy po istorii vosstaniia Kirghiz v 1916 godu [Documents on the history of Kirghiz revolt in 1916], in: Novyi Vostok, vol. 6 (1924), p. 167.
9. ↑ Tursunov, Khabib: Vosstanie 1916 goda v Sredeni Azii i Kazakhstana [The Revolt of 1916 in Central Asia and Kazakhstan]. Tashkent 1962, p. 77.
10. ↑ This phenomenon existed also with the Russian soldiers who deserted, Werth, Nicolas: La Société et la guerre dans les espaces russe et soviétique, 1914-1946, in: Histoire, économie et société, 23/2 (2004), p. 197.
11. ↑ Journal of A. Kuropatkin, ed. by Galuzo, Vosstanie 1916, p. 60; Tursunov, Vosstanie 1916, pp. 313-314.
12. ↑ Galuzo (ed.), Vosstanie 1916 goda v Srednei Azii, p. 43.
13. ↑ “Secret report by Kuropatkin to Nikolai Romanov”, in Galuzo (ed.), Vosstanie 1916 goda v Srednei Azii, p. 87.
14. ↑ Especially the districts of Jarkent and Przhevalsk with, respectively, 72 and 74 percent, Ryskulov, Turar: Vosstanie tuzemtsev v Turkestane v 1916 g. In: Vosstanie Kirghizov i Kazakov v 1916 godu [The revolt of Indigenous people in Turkestan in 1916], Bichkek 2006, p. 34.
15. ↑ Kovalev, Pavel Arkhipovich: Tylovye rabochy Turkestana v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny [The labor battalions of Turkestan during the First World War], Tashkent, 1957.
16. ↑ See for instance Holquist, Peter: Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921, Cambridge 2002.

Selected Bibliography

Broido, Grigorii: **Materialy po istorii vosstaniia Kirghiz v 1916 godu (Documents on the history of the Kirghiz revolt in 1916)**, in: Novyi Vostok 6, 1924.

Buttino, Marco: **La rivoluzione capovolta. L'Asia centrale tra il crollo dell'impero zarista e la formazione dell'URSS**, Naples 2003: L'ancora del Mediterraneo.

Buttino, Marco: **Revolyutsiya naoborot. Srednaya Aziya mezhdu padaniem tsarskoj imperii i obrazovaniem SSSR (Revolution upside down. Central Asia between tsarist empire and the formation of USSR)**, Moscow 2007: Zven'ya.

Galuzo, Petr G.: **Vosstanie 1916 goda v Sredneĭ Azii (The Revolt of 1916 in Central Asia)**, Krasnyĭ arkhiv Sredneĭ Azii, volume 3, Tashkent 1932: Gosizdat UzSSR.

Happel, Jörn: **Nomadische Lebenswelten und zarische Politik. Der Aufstand in Zentralasien 1916**, Stuttgart 2010: Franz Steiner Verlag.

Kovalev, Pavel: **Tylovye rabochy Turkestana v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny (The labor battalions of Turkestan during the First World War)**, Tashkent 1957: Gosizdat UzSSR.

Ryskulov, Turar: **Vosstanie tuzemtsev v Turkestane v 1916 g (The revolt of indigenous people in Turkestan in 1916)**: Vosstanie Kirghizov i Kazakov v 1916 godu, Bichkek 2006, pp. 1-80.

Sokol, Edward D.: **The revolt of 1916 in Russian Central Asia**, Baltimore 1954: Johns Hopkins Press.

Tursunov, Khabib: **Vosstanie 1916 goda v Sredeni Azii i Kazakhstana (The Revolt of 1916 in Central Asia and Kazakhstan)**, Tashkent 1962: Gos. izd-vo Uzbekskoĭ.

Werth, Nicholas: **La société et la guerre dans les espaces russe et soviétique, 1914-1946**, in: Histoire, économie et société 23/2, 2004, pp. 191-214.

Citation

Drieu, Cloé: Turkestan , in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2016-01-20. **DOI**: 10.15463/ie1418.10810.

License

This text is licensed under: CC by-NC-ND 3.0 Germany - Attribution, Non-commercial, No Derivative Works.