

ABSTRACT

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**“Refugee Movements in the Southeastern Region of Kazakhstan:
History and Lessons (1918–1936)”**

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General Overview. The dissertation is devoted to the study of the history of the emergence and evolution of refugee movements in the southeastern region of Kazakhstan from 1918 to 1936. Based on an analysis of archival materials and memoirs, this research examines the socioeconomic and political causes of refugee movements in southeastern Kazakhstan, as well as the formation and historical evolution of Soviet state policy, including the roles of political, military, and security institutions in addressing the refugee problem. The study also analyzes the directions of forced migration from southeastern Kazakhstan and the responses of recipient countries toward refugees, as well as the state mechanisms employed to resolve the refugee issue and the methods and outcomes of the repatriation of refugees to their homeland. Through the analysis of narrative sources, three distinct stages in the development of refugee movements in the studied regions have been identified.

Relevance of the Research Topic. Mass refugee movements differ from ordinary migration processes, as they involve the forced displacement of people to foreign countries due to natural disasters or the destruction of established political, social, economic, or other forms of normal life adapted to their environment. In the final year of World War I and the early postwar period, an unprecedented rise in the number of refugees began. A vast number of refugees found themselves in extremely difficult conditions—deprived of protection, left without the care of their homeland, and facing no prospects for settlement or employment. Initially, the International Committee of the Red Cross, with the assistance of other humanitarian organizations, took up the issue of helping refugees. However, material aid alone could not resolve all the problems associated with the refugees’ lives abroad. Moreover, the resources of voluntary sponsors were quickly depleted, making it necessary to legally regulate the refugee problem. These issues were later addressed by the High Commissioner for Refugees of the League of Nations, who began by clarifying the legal status of refugees in host countries—issuing them identity and travel documents—and sought to provide them with employment opportunities and develop repatriation programs. However, some refugee groups remained overlooked by the international community, including the population of southeastern Kazakhstan, who fled between 1918 and 1936 to China and other border regions. The causes of mass flight from Kazakhstan lay in a series of exploitative economic and political campaigns—such as the state’s seizure of grain, meat, and other resources; forced sedentarization and collectivization of agriculture; repressive campaigns against religious beliefs; and famine caused by food shortages. The topic of refugee movements or forced migration in southeastern Kazakhstan, as well as

the formation and evolution of Soviet policy toward this issue, has not yet been the subject of a comprehensive study in the historical scholarship of Kazakhstan. Previously unpublished archival sources, along with the memoirs of witnesses and descendants of refugees, now make it possible to analyze this issue within the political and socio-economic context of the 1920s–1930s Soviet Union.

Object of the Research. The research focuses on the causes and consequences of refugee movements in the southeastern regions of Kazakhstan, the fate of the refugees, and the policies of donor and recipient countries toward them.

Aim and Objectives of the Research. The main goal of the dissertation is to study the causes, course, main directions, and consequences of mass refugee movements in the southeastern regions of Kazakhstan, as well as to analyze the Soviet government's policy toward refugees.

In accordance with this goal, the dissertation sets out the following **research objectives**:

- To analyze the causes of refugee movements from the border regions of Semirechye and Eastern Kazakhstan to China in 1918–1920;
- To examine the position and actions of the border services of the Republic of China and Soviet Russia regarding refugees in the 1920s;
- Based on an analysis of the activities of the Special Commission for Refugee Affairs under the Central Executive Committee of the Turkestan ASSR and its branches, to identify the essence of Soviet policy toward Kazakh refugees who stayed in China in 1924–1926;
- To analyze the formation and evolution of the concepts of “refugee” and “migrant” (otkochevnik) as applied to the population of southeastern Kazakhstan who fled to China;
- To study the intensification of refugee movements in southeastern Kazakhstan during the confiscation of large estates, grain procurement campaigns, livestock and raw material collection, and the crisis caused by forced collectivization;
- To analyze the causes and mechanisms behind the emergence of armed refugee groups in southeastern Kazakhstan, interpreting them as peasant resistance to the coercive agrarian policies of the Soviet government;
- To examine the socio-legal status of refugees from southeastern Kazakhstan who found asylum in western China;
- To analyze the situation of the population that fled from southeastern Kazakhstan to Kyrgyzstan, as well as the policy of Kyrgyz administrative bodies toward these refugees;
- To identify the main directions of refugee flows from the southeastern regions of Kazakhstan and assess the scale of the demographic catastrophe, including the fate of orphaned children caused by mass displacement;
- To analyze the social consequences of refugee movements in southeastern Kazakhstan and the measures undertaken by central Soviet authorities for the return

and resettlement of refugees (1932–1936), as well as the implementation of these measures by Kazakh institutions.

Research Methods. The methodological foundation of this dissertation is based on the world-systems theory, which provides analytical tools to identify the causes of catastrophes and severe tragedies in Kazakh society during the studied period, rooted in the internal contradictions of the communist experiment in the Soviet Union.

The theory of structural functionalism made it possible to analyze how refugee groups became a dysfunctional element for the local society in Xinjiang, which, in turn, prompted local authorities to accelerate efforts to resolve the refugee issue.

In addition, methods of socio-historical research were applied to analyze the image and perception of different refugee groups. The descriptive method allowed for a deeper understanding of the historical causes behind the emergence and development of refugee movements as a social phenomenon. The historical-systemic method was also employed, which views the object of study as part of a complex, interconnected system.

Scientific Novelty of the Research.

- For the first time, refugee movements in the southeastern regions of Kazakhstan are examined as an independent object of scholarly research.

- It has been established that a segment of the population of southeastern Kazakhstan who fled to China in 1918–1920 to escape Bolshevik persecution consisted of groups that had earlier left for China after the national liberation uprising of 1916 and later returned.

- For the first time in Kazakh historiography, the study analyzes the activities of the Special Commission for Refugee Affairs and its divisions, established by the Central Executive Committee of the Turkestan Republic, as well as the Special Commission under the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, both of which aimed to restore the complex socio-political situation in the Semirechye region.

- Based on newly discovered archival materials, the study analyzes the positions of the Russian and Chinese border authorities regarding refugees, revealing that the jurisdiction of the Special Commission was not recognized by military-border structures.

- For the first time, the study explores the history of refugees who attempted to cross the border with the help of armed formations they created themselves or organized by relatives in China. To define this historical phenomenon, the term “armed refuge” is introduced.

- The research also analyzes the socio-legal status of Kazakh refugees in China and the policy of the Xinjiang authorities toward these migrant groups.

Theoretical and Practical Significance of the Study. The theoretical significance of the dissertation lies in the fact that the analysis of narrative materials and the conclusions drawn contribute to the reconstruction of the true history of the

social catastrophes and tragedies that occurred in Soviet Kazakhstan during the first half of the 20th century.

The materials and findings of this dissertation can be used in the writing of comprehensive studies on the history of refugees, the development of educational programs, the creation of teaching materials, and the design of specialized courses in social and political history.

Main Provisions Submitted for Defense.

1. The first stage of refugee movements from the southeastern regions of Soviet Kazakhstan to China covers the years 1918–1919. During this period, in southeastern Kazakhstan—engulfed by Bolshevik violence and civil war—the first attempts were made by Soviet authorities to halt the exodus and return refugees to their former places of residence.

2. The situation of refugees who fled to China after the defeat of the 1916 national liberation uprising in southeastern Kazakhstan, and later in 1918 due to persecution by Red partisans and Russian settler-colonists, was extremely difficult. The border services of Xinjiang and Soviet Russia actively prevented attempts by refugees to return home.

3. After the civil war, the governments of Xinjiang and Soviet Turkestan, both interested in resolving the refugee issue that negatively affected the demographic and socioeconomic development of both sides, signed the “Ili Agreement.” The departments of the Special Commission for Refugee Affairs, established under the Central Executive Committee of the Turkestan ASSR, played a crucial role in repatriating and resettling refugees to their previous locations.

3. During the campaign to confiscate property from wealthy bai households in southeastern Kazakhstan, there was a renewed wave of migration to China. To prevent further refugee movements, Soviet authorities confiscated goods seized near the border as contraband and redistributed them to the poor through the “Koshshi” Union. Economic and political campaigns—such as state grain procurement and livestock requisition—also contributed to increased emigration.

4. A localized peasant uprising in southeastern Kazakhstan in the late 1920s escalated into an organized armed rebellion. However, Communist detachments and regular military units in border areas crushed the poorly armed insurgents and looted their property.

5. Refugees from southeastern Kazakhstan, subjected to raids by Kalmyk military units near the Chinese border and facing legal discrimination from local Chinese authorities and the population, began to form armed groups for self-defense. The activities of Kazakh refugees and their leaders in China were closely monitored by OGPU agents.

6. The passivity of Soviet authorities in Kazakhstan regarding the repatriation of refugees from Kyrgyzstan led to a demographic catastrophe. The pressure on Kazakh refugees in Kyrgyzstan was somewhat eased only after the intervention of the Chairman of the International Red Cross Council of the Kyrgyz ASSR.

7. As a result of forced agricultural modernization, many residents of southeastern Kazakhstan migrated to other regions of the Soviet Union. This caused a sharp decline in livestock numbers and aggravated food shortages. In many districts, a crisis in agriculture emerged, accompanied by rising mortality due to famine.

8. The mass exodus of the population from southeastern Kazakhstan led to an increase in the number of homeless children. Orphanages were opened in the region, but they suffered from insufficient resources and food shortages, and cases of starvation were also recorded within these institutions.

9. The measures undertaken by the Commission for the Elimination of Refugee Movements, established under the government of Kazakhstan to address the situation in the southeastern regions, proved insufficient. Refugees continued to be punished for leaving their permanent residences. Efforts to repatriate and resettle refugees from Central Asian republics and China were poorly coordinated, and the reintegration of refugees was primarily aimed at providing labor for specific sectors of the economy.

Approbation of the Research. The dissertation was carried out at the Department of 20th Century History of Kazakhstan at the Ch. Ch. Valikhanov Institute of History and Ethnology, and at the Department of World History, Historiography, and Source Studies of the Faculty of History at Al-Farabi Kazakh National University. The dissertation was discussed at an extended session involving scholars from both institutions, as well as from the Department of History of Kazakhstan at Al-Farabi KazNU. The main results of the research have been published and presented at international conferences. In total, 16 works were published on the dissertation topic, including: 1 article in a Scopus-indexed journal; 9 articles in national academic journals recommended by the Committee for Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education of the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan; 1 chapter in a collective monograph; 2 papers in international and 4 in national conferences. Additionally, two collections of archival documents related to the topic were published, in which the author participated as a compiler.

Structure of the Dissertation. The dissertation consists of a list of abbreviations, an introduction, three chapters divided into ten subsections, a conclusion, a bibliography, and appendices.