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	JIF = 1.500	SJIF (Morocco) = 6.004	OAJI (USA) = 0.350

SOI: 1.1/TAS DOI: 10.15863/TAS

International Scientific Journal

Theoretical & Applied Science

p-ISSN: 2308-4944 (print) **e-ISSN:** 2409-0085 (online)

Year: 2026 **Issue:** 10 **Volume:** 162

Received: 21.10.2026
Accepted/Published: 30.10.2026

https://T-Science.org

Issue Article

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REFUGEES IN TURKESTAN DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR: TERRITORIAL DISTRIBUTION AND ADMINISTRATIVE APPROACHES

Abstract: *This article examines the issue of refugees forcibly displaced to Turkestan from the western frontline regions of the Russian Empire during the First World War. Drawing on statistical data as of November 15, 1915, the study analyzes the settlement of refugees in the Transcaspian, Syrdarya, Fergana, and Samarkand regions. The article highlights the uneven territorial distribution of refugees and demonstrates that major administrative, transport, and economic centers became the principal areas of reception and accommodation. It also discusses the arrival and placement of refugees in the Emirate of Bukhara, particularly in Charjui and New Bukhara. The findings show that the refugee question in Turkestan was not an isolated or temporary phenomenon, but rather a large-scale and systematic manifestation of wartime migration. The study contributes to a broader understanding of the demographic, social, and administrative consequences of the First World War in Central Asia.*

Key words: *First World War, Turkestan region, refugees, forced migration, Transcaspian region, Syrdarya region, Fergana region, Samarkand region, Emirate of Bukhara, settlement policy.*

Language: *English*

Citation: Tojiboev, J. (2026). Refugees in Turkestan during the first world war: territorial distribution and administrative approaches. *ISJ Theoretical & Applied Science, 10 (162),* 26-30.

Soi: https://s-o-i.org/1.1/TAS-10-162-5 ***Doi***: crossref https://dx.doi.org/10.15863/TAS.2026.10.162.5

Scopus ASCC: *1202.*

Introduction

The First World War left a profound mark on history not only through military and political developments but also through large-scale demographic shifts, forced displacement, and social crises. During the war, military operations along the western borders of the Russian Empire compelled millions of civilians to leave their homes. As a result, people displaced from territories such as Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and Latvia were directed to the empire's interior governorates, the Volga region, Siberia, the Far East, and Central Asia. This process became one of the largest episodes of forced migration in the history of the Russian Empire.

This migratory movement also directly affected Turkestan. Situated far from the front and regarded as a relatively stable interior territory, the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan became one of the empire's important regions for the temporary accommodation and supervision of refugees and for their potential employment as a labor force. Railway networks, major administrative centers, urban infrastructure, and the capacities of local authorities played particularly important roles in receiving refugees.

By 1915, the number of refugees in the Transcaspian, Syrdarya, Fergana, and Samarkand regions of Turkestan had increased substantially. Their distribution among regions and uyezds (districts) was uneven: certain localities, notably the administratively and logistically significant centers of Tashkent, Ashgabat, Merv, Skobelev, and Samarkand, became principal reception points. Conversely, the small numbers recorded in certain uyezds, or the incompleteness of their statistical records, also reveal problems in wartime recordkeeping. This suggests that refugee settlement was not implemented according to a strictly centralized plan but rather in accordance with local capacities, infrastructural resources, and administrative functions.

The study of refugees in Turkestan is important for a deeper understanding of the socioeconomic processes of the First World War. The influx of refugees directly affected local administration, food supplies, housing, sanitary and medical conditions, labor markets, and the activities of charitable organizations. Accordingly, this issue should be examined not merely as a demographic or statistical phenomenon but as a complex historical process that influenced the social, economic, and administrative life of wartime Turkestan.

This article aims to analyze the scale, territorial distribution, and settlement patterns of refugee movements into Turkestan during the First World War on the basis of historical and statistical evidence. Drawing on archival records dated November 15, 1915, region-level statistics, and existing scholarship, it examines refugee settlement in the Transcaspian, Syrdarya, Fergana, and Samarkand regions and the Emirate of Bukhara. Through historical-comparative analysis, statistical analysis, and a territorial approach, the article seeks to demonstrate that the refugee question in Turkestan was a large-scale, systemic social phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODS

The refugee crisis that emerged in the Russian Empire during the First World War has developed into a distinct field of historical scholarship. Researchers regard it not only as a consequence of a military-political crisis but also as a major socioeconomic and demographic displacement within the empire, an instance of forced migration, and a serious test for the state administration.

The studies of I. B. Belova are particularly important to this subject. Belova examines forced migrants in the Russian Empire during the First World War, including refugees and prisoners of war, from an empire-wide perspective, focusing on their numbers, composition, accommodation, and social circumstances [4]. Her approach makes it possible to understand the refugee question not simply as evacuation from frontline areas but as a complex historical phenomenon affecting socioeconomic life in the interior regions.

P. Gatrell's scholarship is distinguished by its placement of the Russian Empire's refugee crisis within international historiography. In A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I, he interprets wartime refugee movements as a demographic and humanitarian crisis encompassing the entire empire [6]. His article "War, Refugeedom, Revolution: Understanding Russia's Refugee Crisis, 1914–1918" likewise examines the refugee question in relation to war, revolution, and the weakening of state institutions [5]. This approach provides a theoretical basis for assessing the refugee influx into Turkestan as part of the Russian Empire's wider migratory processes.

The studies of A. M. Tikhonova and S. Kuznetsova likewise address refugees' difficult social circumstances, exploitation, employment, and dependence on assistance from state and public organizations [7; 11].

M. Stockdale analyzes patriotism, mobilization, and citizenship in Russian society during the First World War [10]. This perspective allows the refugee question to be considered not only as a humanitarian challenge but also as a process associated with the empire's political and social mobilization systems.

At the same time, most existing studies examine the refugee question in the Russian Empire as a whole or in selected central governorates. The movement of refugees to Turkestan, their distribution among regions and uyezds, the local administrative system, and the territorial characteristics of settlement have received insufficient focused attention. The contribution of this article therefore lies in its specific examination of refugee settlement in Turkestan using documents from the National Archives of Uzbekistan and statistical information dated November 15, 1915 [1; 2; 3; 4; 5; 6].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The First World War (1914–1918) inflicted enormous losses on the Russian Empire, and the exceptionally large number of people forcibly displaced within the country was among its most serious consequences. Beginning in 1914, refugees from areas affected by military operations began arriving in various parts of the empire. Between 1914 and 1917, approximately five million people were compelled, under orders and pressure from military authorities, to leave their homes and places of birth and move to interior governorates in central Russia, the Volga region, Siberia, the Far East, and Central Asia. They came primarily from areas affected by fighting on the Western Front, including the territories of present-day Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, and Latvia [14]. Refugees also began moving into the regions of the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan, and by late 1915 their numbers had become substantial.

Table 1. Refugee population in the Transcaspian Region (as of November 15, 1915) [5]

No.	Uyezd (district)	Present-day name	Number of refugees
1	Ashgabat	Ashgabat	6033
2	Krasnovodsk	Turkmenbashi	1258
3	Merv	Mary	6687
4	Tejen	Tejen	520
5	Mangyshlak	Mangyshlak	—
	Total		14498

The table indicates that, by late 1915, refugee settlement in the Transcaspian Region was geographically extensive and unevenly distributed. Nearly 14,500 refugees were living across four uyezds, demonstrating that the region had become an important reception area during the war. This situation was directly related to its geographical location, proximity to railway and port infrastructure, and administrative capacity.

The largest numbers of refugees were accommodated in Merv and Ashgabat uyezds, suggesting that these districts had relatively greater capacity to receive displaced people. The presence of 756 refugees in the settlement of Yolotan in Merv uyezd and 500 in Kaakhka in Ashgabat uyezd shows that refugees were settled not only in major urban centers but also in smaller localities with suitable transport connections and living conditions.

In addition, 801 refugees found shelter in the town of Kizyl-Arvat in Krasnovodsk uyezd, indicating that this transport and industrial center played a significant role in receiving refugee movements. This evidence supports the importance of economic infrastructure and employment opportunities as factors in refugee settlement policy.

These figures suggest that settlement in the Transcaspian Region was organized not according to a uniform centralized plan but on the basis of each territory's practical capacity and functional significance. The wartime migration policy was therefore adaptable, although the burden of refugee reception remained uneven across districts.

Table 2. Refugee population in the Syrdarya Region (as of November 15, 1915) [5]

No.	Uyezd (district)	Present-day name	Number of refugees
1	Tashkent	Tashkent	16584
2	Chimkent	Shymkent	2883
3	Aulie-Ata	Taraz	2038
4	Perovsk	Kyzylorda	585
5	Kazalinsk	Kazaly	588
	Total		22678

The table reveals a clear tendency toward concentration in refugee settlement in the Syrdarya Region. The largest number of refugees was recorded in Tashkent uyezd, indicating that its administrative, economic, and infrastructural capacity exceeded that of the other districts. Approximately 14,000 refugees resided in the city of Tashkent alone, confirming the city's role as a principal wartime reception and distribution center.

Nearly 3,000 refugees were accommodated in the town of Chernyaev in Chimkent uyezd, making it the second-largest reception point in the Syrdarya Region. This may be explained by Chernyaev's proximity to transport routes, economic activity, and employment opportunities. At the same time, the marked numerical difference between Tashkent and Chernyaev points to an unequal distribution of the settlement burden.

These indicators demonstrate that refugee settlement in the Syrdarya Region was directed primarily toward major urban centers and that territories with stronger administrative institutions and infrastructure absorbed the main flow of displaced people.

Table 3. Refugee population in the Fergana Region (as of November 15, 1915) [6]

No.	Uyezd (district)	Present-day name	Number of refugees
1	Kokand	Kokand	2163
2	Skobelev	Fergana	9767
3	Namangan	Namangan	2900
4	Andijan	Andijan	4425
5	Osh	Osh	1440
	Total		20695

These data show that refugee settlement in the Fergana Region was characterized by territorial inequality and a tendency toward concentration. The largest share of refugees was accommodated in Skobelev uyezd, suggesting that its infrastructure, proximity to transport routes, and administrative capacity were superior to those of other districts. Almost half of the region's prisoners of war—approximately 10,000 individuals—were reportedly accommodated in this district, further underscoring Skobelev's role as a strategic and organizational center.

Andijan, Namangan, and Kokand uyezds followed in terms of refugee numbers, suggesting a policy of phased distribution. In particular, 807 and 258 refugees found shelter in Jalal-Abad and Bazar-Korgon, respectively, in Andijan uyezd. This indicates that refugees were accommodated not only in major urban centers but also, to a lesser extent, in smaller settlements, reflecting an effort to make wider use of local economic and social resources.

These circumstances indicate that refugee settlement policy in the Fergana Region took shape through a combination of geographical, demographic, and administrative factors, with some uyezds bearing a considerably greater burden than others.

Table 4. Refugee population in the Samarkand Region (as of November 15, 1915) [6]

No.	Uyezd (district)	Present-day name	Number of refugees
1	Samarkand	Samarkand	8400
2	Kattakurgan	Kattakurgan	2849
3	Jizzakh	Jizzakh	—
4	Khujand	Khujand	—
	Total		11249

By November 15, 1915, more than 11,000 refugees had been recorded in the Samarkand and Kattakurgan uyezds of the Samarkand Region, demonstrating the importance of these districts as reception centers. At the same time, the absence of figures for refugees residing in Jizzakh and Khujand uyezds may reflect territorial variations in statistical recordkeeping, gaps in documentation, or a lower administrative priority assigned to those districts. This allows the tentative conclusion that the wartime system of administrative accounting did not function fully or consistently.

Refugees were also brought to and accommodated within the Emirate of Bukhara. Official documents recorded 792 refugees in the emirate at that time [6]. Following the establishment of a designated residential facility for refugees, arrivals increased in Charjui, which belonged to the emirate. At the beginning of 1915, 560 adult refugees and 156 children were recorded there [1]. According to information from the imperial political agency in Bukhara, approximately 800 refugees were accommodated in New Bukhara (Kagan) and Charjui [2]. By late 1915, a further 200 refugees had arrived at each of the refugee camps in Charjui and New Bukhara. One-sixth of these arrivals were children [3; 4].

CONCLUSION

A comparative analysis of the tables above indicates that, as of November 15, 1915, the number of refugees in Turkestan approached 70,000. This figure demonstrates the considerable scale of wartime migration and confirms that Turkestan had become one of the Russian Empire's major regions for receiving and accommodating refugees.

The rapid growth in refugee numbers can be attributed, on the one hand, to the intensity of military operations and forced displacement in the frontline territories and, on the other, to Turkestan's

geographical position, transport networks, and relative stability as an interior region. The regional differences documented in the tables suggest that refugee settlement was carried out not through a single centralized system but according to the practical capacities of individual regions and uyezds.

The presence of nearly 70,000 refugees also placed a sharply increased burden on Turkestan's socioeconomic and sanitary systems. This situation presented state and public institutions with complex challenges concerning food supplies, housing, employment, and healthcare. Under these conditions, organizational, financial, and medical measures undertaken by government bodies and charitable organizations played an important role in managing the refugee influx.

Overall, the figures established through analysis of these tables support the conclusion that the refugee question in Turkestan during the First World War was not an episodic occurrence but a large-scale, systemic social phenomenon that significantly influenced the region's demographic, economic, and social development.

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