



The Establishment Of Soviet Government Organs In Turkestan (1917–1924) And Their Role In The Policy Of Public Service Provision

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of Soviet governing structures in Turkestan between 1917 and 1924 and evaluates their role in organizing public services amid civil war, famine, and institutional transition. It traces the shift from revolutionary committees and city soviets to the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic's (TASSR) people's commissariats, supervised by the Turkestan Commission, and shows how these bodies attempted to deliver utilities, food supply, health care, education, and transport under conditions of scarce resources and contested legitimacy. Using a comparative-institutional approach grounded in decrees, administrative records, and secondary scholarship, the study argues that the early Soviet period laid the administrative foundations for mass public services through centralization, nationalization, and the New Economic Policy's pragmatic adjustments. Nevertheless, cadre shortages, urban–rural divides, and insurgency constrained reach and quality. The period culminated in national-territorial delimitation in 1924, which reconfigured governance but preserved the central features of Soviet service provision.

Keywords

Turkestan, Soviets, public services, TASSR, Turkkomissii, health and education policy, NEP, national-territorial delimitation.

Introduction

The collapse of imperial rule in 1917 opened a fluid political space in Turkestan, where multiple actors competed to define legitimate authority and the contours of social provision. Early soviets formed in urban centers such as Tashkent, often dominated by European settler and railway workers, while Muslim reformist organizations and local committees advanced alternative agendas. By 1918 the Bolsheviks established the TASSR with a Council of People's Commissars and sectoral commissariats intended to extend central policies to a multiethnic, predominantly rural region. These institutions confronted immediate emergencies—war damage, epidemics, and food shortages—while seeking to build mass services where imperial provision had been limited and uneven. The tension between revolutionary mobilization and bureaucratic stabilization framed the formative years of Soviet public service policy.

The study aims to analyze how Soviet government organs in Turkestan were formed between 1917 and 1924 and to assess their concrete role in designing and delivering public services, with attention to institutional sequencing, policy instruments, and regional constraints.

The research relies on a comparative-institutional analysis of normative acts issued by central and regional authorities, collections of early Soviet decrees, and specialized historical scholarship on Central Asia. Periodization distinguishes an initial phase of dual power and civil

war (1917–1919), a phase of administrative consolidation under the Turkestan Commission and TASSR commissariats (1919–1921), and a phase of policy recalibration under the New Economic Policy (1921–1924). The method links organizational change to sectoral outcomes in food supply, utilities, health, education, and transport, situating Turkestan within broader Soviet state-building.

The first stage saw the proliferation of soviets, revolutionary committees, and emergency commissions that prioritized control over strategic assets—railways, warehouses, and urban utilities. Public service measures were improvised, relying on requisitions, municipal nationalizations, and the mobilization of workers' committees. The Tashkent Soviet coordinated relief and sanitation during epidemics, but coverage remained urban and fragmented. Political polarization between European-dominated soviets and Muslim organizations limited recruitment of local cadres, constraining rural outreach at a time when subsistence and irrigation needs were acute.

Administrative consolidation accelerated after 1919 with the establishment of the Turkestan Commission of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee and Council of People's Commissars, which imposed supervisory oversight on TASSR bodies. Sectoral commissariats for food supply, health, education, and social welfare translated central directives into regional programs. The food supply commissariat organized grain collection and distribution, introduced rationing, and attempted to stabilize prices; these policies mitigated urban shortages but strained relations with the countryside. In health care the People's Commissariat of Health created sanitary-epidemiological stations, launched anti-typhus and anti-cholera campaigns, and began integrating local charitable hospitals into a state network. Education policy shifted toward mass literacy: the People's Commissariat of Education expanded primary schools, teacher training, and publishing in several languages, while negotiating curriculum between socialist content and local cultural forms. Public utilities and transport were reorganized under nationalized enterprises, with efforts to repair water mains, tram lines, and depots damaged by war, though spare parts and skilled personnel remained scarce.

The 1921 famine and the adoption of the New Economic Policy prompted a recalibration from coercive requisitioning to tax in kind and limited market mechanisms. For service provision, NEP meant pragmatic partnerships with cooperatives and concessions for municipal services such as food retail and small repairs, while maintaining state control over strategic infrastructure. Health services increasingly relied on preventive medicine and standard sanitary regulations, while education policy prioritized basic literacy and the training of local teachers to reduce dependence on imported cadres. The authorities also experimented with *korenizatsiia*—promotion of local languages and recruitment—seeking to broaden participation in administration and service delivery. Implementation remained uneven: cadre shortages, security operations against insurgent groups, and fiscal constraints limited rural penetration and sustained disparities between cities and the countryside.

Institutionally, the early Soviet state sought to overcome fragmentation by standardizing procedures, budgets, and reporting lines. Commissariats adopted uniform forms for expenditure and staffing, and public health and education issued circulars prescribing service norms per capita and per district. These measures improved predictability and enabled rudimentary planning, yet rigid templates sometimes clashed with local ecological and social conditions, particularly in oasis agriculture and nomadic zones. Moreover, the urban

administrative core often lacked granular knowledge of irrigation, pasture cycles, and mahalla-based welfare practices, slowing program uptake. Notwithstanding these limits, the period established the essential architecture of Soviet social provision: hierarchical commissariats, centrally defined targets, budgetary subordination, and mass campaigns in health and literacy. The culmination of this formative cycle came with the national-territorial delimitation of 1924, which dissolved the TASSR and created new union republics and autonomous entities. While borders and administrative centers were redefined, the organizational grammar of public service provision—sectoral commissariats, standardized norms, and a mixed NEP-era financing model—was largely preserved and transplanted into successor institutions. Thus, the 1917–1924 experience in Turkestan functioned as both a laboratory and a proving ground for broader Soviet social policy.

Between 1917 and 1924 Soviet government organs in Turkestan evolved from emergency revolutionary bodies into a network of sectoral commissariats capable of administering essential public services. Their achievements—containment of epidemics, initial expansion of schooling, stabilization of urban supply, and the reorganization of utilities—were significant given the context of civil war and scarcity. Yet service quality and reach were constrained by cadre deficits, contested legitimacy, and structural urban–rural divides. The transition to NEP and early korenizatsiia introduced pragmatism and limited localization without altering the centralizing logic of the system. National-territorial delimitation reconfigured administrative boundaries but retained the institutional model of provision. The period's legacy lies in establishing the centralized frameworks that would define Soviet public services for decades, while demonstrating the persistent challenges of adapting standardized policies to diverse local conditions.

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