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**TURKESTANI SOLDIERS IN THE SECOND WORLD WAR: MILITARY
SERVICE, CAPTIVITY AND HISTORICAL MEMORY**

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Abstract: The participation of soldiers from historical Turkestan in the Second World War represents an important but insufficiently studied dimension of twentieth-century history. Thousands of Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Tajiks and representatives of other Central Asian communities served in the Soviet armed forces, worked in military industries and supported the front through agricultural production. At the same time, a considerable number of Central Asian soldiers were captured during the first years of the German–Soviet war and experienced hunger, disease, forced labour and ideological pressure in prisoner-of-war camps. Some prisoners were later recruited into military formations created by Nazi Germany, including the Turkestan Legion. This paper argues that the wartime experience of Turkestani soldiers cannot be reduced either to a heroic Soviet narrative or to accusations of collaboration. Their experiences should be examined through the broader contexts of mobilization, colonial and national identity, captivity, coercion, survival and post-war memory.

Keywords: Turkestan, Second World War, Central Asia, Soviet Army, Turkestan Legion, prisoners of war, historical memory.

The Second World War had a profound demographic, economic and social impact on Central Asia. Although the main battlefields were located in the European part of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics became an important source of soldiers, industrial workers, agricultural products and logistical support. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan received evacuated factories, scientific institutions, cultural organizations and civilians from territories occupied or threatened by Nazi Germany.

The term “Turkestani soldiers” in this paper refers broadly to servicemen originating from Soviet Central Asia. It does not suggest that these soldiers formed a politically or ethnically homogeneous group. They spoke different languages, belonged to different social backgrounds and entered the war with different levels of military training, education and political experience.

Recent research has emphasized that Central Asian participation in the war should be studied not only through official military reports but also through personal letters, oral histories, family archives and regional sources. Vicky Davis’s research, based on archival documents and the experiences of ordinary Central Asian citizens, demonstrates the



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importance of examining the relationship between individuals and the Soviet state during wartime.

Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, large-scale military mobilization was introduced throughout the Soviet republics. Young men from Central Asian cities and rural districts were recruited into infantry, cavalry, engineering, communications, medical and logistical units. Many soldiers experienced considerable difficulties because of language barriers, limited military preparation and unfamiliar climatic conditions.

Nevertheless, Central Asian soldiers participated in major battles on different fronts. They served in the defence of Moscow and Leningrad, the Battle of Stalingrad, operations in Ukraine and Belarus, and the final campaigns in Eastern and Central Europe. Some were recognized for courage, while many others remained ordinary soldiers whose names and experiences were preserved mainly in family memory.

The contribution of Turkestani soldiers should not be viewed separately from the role of the Central Asian home front. Families provided food, clothing and financial assistance to the army. Women, elderly people and adolescents replaced mobilized men in agriculture and industry. Evacuated enterprises were established in cities such as Tashkent, Almaty and other regional centres. Consequently, the wartime contribution of Turkestan included both direct military participation and the economic support of the Soviet war effort.

At the same time, military service exposed inequalities within the Soviet system. Russian was the principal language of military command, and recruits with limited knowledge of Russian sometimes misunderstood orders or received inadequate training. Cultural stereotypes concerning Central Asian soldiers also influenced relations within military units. However, front-line experience could also create new forms of solidarity among soldiers from different Soviet republics.

The most tragic experiences occurred among soldiers captured during the rapid German advances of 1941 and 1942. Soviet prisoners of war were subjected to systematic starvation, disease, forced labour and mass killing. According to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, approximately 5.7 million Soviet military personnel were captured by German forces, and around 3.3 million died in captivity by the end of the war.

Central Asian prisoners were also affected by Nazi racial policies. Although German authorities occasionally attempted to distinguish Muslims and Turkic peoples from other Soviet prisoners for political reasons, this did not protect them from brutal camp conditions. In the first months of captivity, prisoners frequently lacked sufficient food, shelter and medical assistance. Many died before the German administration began systematic recruitment among Soviet nationalities.

Captivity placed soldiers in extreme circumstances. Their decisions were influenced by hunger, physical violence, fear of death and uncertainty about their future. Therefore, the behaviour of prisoners cannot always be classified through simple categories such as loyalty or betrayal. Survival strategies included accepting auxiliary work, concealing



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political or ethnic identity, escaping from camps, joining resistance groups or agreeing to recruitment into German-controlled formations.

The Turkestan Legion remains one of the most controversial aspects of the history of Central Asian soldiers. German military authorities established the formation to recruit prisoners originating from Central Asia. It included Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and other groups whom German documents commonly classified as “Turkestanis.” Historical research indicates that the German High Command formally approved the creation of a Turkestan Legion in late 1941.

Nazi Germany attempted to use anti-Soviet feelings, religious identity and promises of national independence to attract recruits. Some émigré intellectuals hoped that Germany’s war against the Soviet Union might create an opportunity for the political liberation of Turkestan. However, Nazi leaders had no genuine intention of establishing an independent Central Asian state. Their policy was primarily determined by military needs and racial ideology.

The motives of legion members were different. A small number may have been convinced anti-Soviet nationalists. Others joined to escape starvation, disease or death in prisoner-of-war camps. Some expected to desert when sent to the front, while others were placed in support units without meaningful freedom of choice. For this reason, membership in the legion does not automatically reveal a person’s political convictions.

A balanced historical analysis must distinguish voluntary ideological collaboration from recruitment under coercive conditions. It should also examine what soldiers did after joining these units. Some remained in German service, while others deserted, joined partisan movements or surrendered to Allied forces. Individual cases should therefore be studied through military files, interrogation records, memoirs and family archives.

After the war, Soviet citizens who had been held in German captivity were subjected to investigation and filtration. Former prisoners frequently faced suspicion because Soviet ideology associated surrender with disloyalty. Those who had served in German-controlled formations could receive imprisonment, exile or other punishment. Even soldiers who had not collaborated often avoided discussing their captivity because of social stigma.

As a result, the history of Turkestani prisoners and legion members remained largely absent from public discussion. Soviet commemorative culture emphasized victory, heroism and unity, while uncomfortable experiences such as mass surrender, captivity and coercive recruitment received limited attention.

After the independence of the Central Asian republics, researchers gained greater opportunities to study national participation in the war. Nevertheless, there is still a danger of replacing one simplified narrative with another. Presenting all Central Asian soldiers exclusively as heroes ignores the complexity of captivity and repression. At the same time, describing all legion members as national liberation fighters overlooks Nazi crimes and the coercive environment of prisoner-of-war camps.



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Historical memory should therefore be based on critical analysis and respect for individual experience. Digital databases, oral-history projects and cooperation between Central Asian and European archives can help identify missing soldiers and reconstruct their biographies.

The history of Turkestani soldiers in the Second World War reflects the complex relationship between war, empire, national identity and individual survival. Central Asians contributed significantly to the Soviet military effort and suffered substantial human losses. Those captured by Nazi Germany faced a system characterized by racial discrimination, starvation, forced labour and mass death.

The history of the Turkestan Legion must be analysed within this environment. Political conviction, coercion, hunger, fear and survival could all influence the choices of prisoners. Consequently, collective accusations and simplified judgments should be replaced by careful examination of individual cases.

A more complete understanding requires the integration of Soviet, German and Central Asian archival materials. Such research would restore the experiences of ordinary soldiers to historical scholarship and promote a more humane and evidence-based memory of the Second World War.

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