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Defining "Neglect" in Early Soviet Turkestan: Terminology, Historiography and the Source Base for the Study of Institutions for Homeless Children and Adolescents, 1918–1924

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Abstract. The mass appearance of homeless and neglected children (besprizornye) was one of the most visible social consequences of war, revolution and famine in the former Russian Empire. Yet the vocabulary used to describe these children was unstable, and in Soviet Turkestan it was applied to a society whose family, charitable and legal institutions differed markedly from those of central Russia. This article examines how the categories "neglected child" (bezprizornost', beznadzornost') and "neglected adolescent" took shape in Russian and Soviet legal-pedagogical thought, how they were consolidated in Soviet legislation by 1926, and how they should be adapted for research on the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Turkestan ASSR, 1918–1924). It then offers a four-part survey of the scholarship (Soviet-era practitioners, post-independence Uzbek historians, Russian and Kazakh historians, and Anglophone Sovietology) and reviews the archival and published sources on which the history of Turkestan's educational and rehabilitative institutions can be written. The article argues that existing studies treat Turkestan mostly as a chronological or geographical fragment of broader Uzbek or all-Union narratives, and that the region's specific institutional arrangements deserve to be studied in their own right.

Keywords: homeless children; neglect; Turkestan ASSR; early Soviet social policy; historiography; orphanages; Central Asia

1. Introduction

Between 1917 and the early 1920s, war, political upheaval and famine left millions of children in Soviet Russia without parents or adequate supervision. Estimates for the early 1920s range from roughly 4.5 to 7 million homeless children across the country, and one widely cited account puts the number of children in orphanages at only about 30,000 in 1917 but at some 540,000 by 1922 [11; 14]. Turkestan, the Soviet republic that covered most of present-day Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, experienced these processes in a particularly acute form, as political violence in the Ferghana Valley, the collapse of trade with central Russia and successive famines coincided with the arrival of thousands of child refugees from the Volga region.

The present article is concerned with a preliminary but indispensable question: what, precisely, did contemporaries and later historians mean when they wrote about "neglected" children and adolescents, and how can these categories be used responsibly for Turkestan? The question is not merely semantic. The way a child was classified—as an orphan, as "neglected", as "in need of temporary assistance", or as a juvenile offender—determined which institution would receive him or her: an ordinary orphanage, a labour commune, a labour colony or a reformatory. Terminology therefore shaped policy, and policy in turn shaped the archival record available to historians today.

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The article draws on the author's doctoral research on educational institutions for neglected children and adolescents in Turkestan. It proceeds in four steps. First, it reconstructs the conceptual vocabulary. Second, it traces the legal consolidation of the key categories. Third, it surveys the historiography. Fourth, it assesses the available sources and the methodological problems they pose.

2. The conceptual vocabulary

2.1. Child, minor and "street child"

In legal usage, a "child" is any person under eighteen unless legislation specifies otherwise, whereas "minor" (or, in the 1920s idiom, "adolescent") is most often applied to persons aged fourteen to eighteen [24]. Contemporary international definitions treat "street children" as those who, because of poverty or violence, have left their families and live without a fixed residence, and some typologies distinguish children of the street from children on the street, as well as children from neglected families and children in residential institutions [24]. These modern classifications are useful for comparison, but they were unknown to the actors of the 1920s and should not be projected onto the sources.

2.2. The classical Russian typology

The most influential early definition was formulated by the jurist and criminologist Sergei Poznyshev. For him, besprizornost' was a chronic relation between a minor and his or her surroundings in which the child, because of insufficient physical and mental strength, cannot guide himself or herself without serious danger [8]. Poznyshev distinguished three forms: neglect as homelessness (besprizornost'-bezdomnost'), where the child has neither parents nor relatives willing to take responsibility; neglect as abandonment (besprizornost'-zabroshennost'), where the child has shelter but essential needs go largely unmet; and neglect as lack of supervision (besprizornost'-beznadzornost'), where adults provide for material needs to some extent but fail to supervise development and conduct. He also identified a "semi-neglected" category of children from families that were intact but unable, through lack of time or will, to supervise them adequately [8].

Lev Vasilevsky's 1924 study, The Golgotha of the Child, approached the problem causally, presenting neglect as the result of material need, a deficient moral and psychological environment and indifference to intellectual development; he also argued that the "seeds" of neglect could be sown inside apparently secure families when parents ignored a child's inner life [9]. Lyublinsky and Kopelyanskaya (1924) systematised these ideas in a legal-institutional direction, analysing the status of children's institutions, their management and the powers of commissions for minors [10].

2.3. "Defectiveness" versus social causation

In the early 1920s a further vocabulary competed with the above: the notion of "child defectiveness". Some pedagogues and physicians linked the antisocial behaviour of neglected and delinquent children to innate defects and mental deviations. Researchers such as Kufaev, Plyusnin and Blonsky rejected this view, demonstrating through studies of family, economic and social circumstances that antisocial behaviour derived from social and economic conditions rather than from congenital traits [6; 12]. The dispute was not abstract. If conduct was biologically determined, a medical-isolating response (for example, referral to a reformatory) seemed logical; if socially determined, an educational and social response (an orphanage or labour commune) was preferred. Official Soviet pedagogy formally endorsed the social explanation, but the practice of the period, particularly where trained psychologists and pedagogues were scarce, did not always follow it [12].

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2.4. Neglect and lack of supervision

Russian historiography has since refined the distinction between besprizornost' and beznadzornost'. Slavko, for example, uses "homeless" (besprizornyi) for children who have severed contact with the family and have no dwelling, often surviving by illegal means, and "neglected" (beznadzornyi) for those who retain family ties but lack proper supervision; at the same time he notes that until the end of the 1920s the two terms effectively designated one social category [13]. This is the approach adopted here. In the Turkestan context, "neglected child" is used in the broad sense current in the 1920s, while "homeless" and "unsupervised" are used analytically where the sources allow the distinction. The boundary between them was historically variable: it hardened into two parallel legal categories only in the mid-1930s, especially after the 1935 decree on the liquidation of child homelessness and neglect [14].

3. Legal consolidation of the categories

The term itself is relatively recent in Russian usage. According to the literature, it entered Russian from the French moralement abandonné ("morally abandoned") in the early twentieth century and received its first normative expression in a 1913 draft resolution on supervision of neglected children prepared for the First All-Russian Congress on Juvenile Courts. Before 1917, however, it was scarcely used in actual practice, and its wide diffusion belongs to the post-revolutionary period [15].

After 1917 the Soviet state moved to institutionalise child welfare. A decree of 1 December 1917 formally placed responsibility for children on the state, and in 1919 a State Council for the Protection of Children was set up under the People's Commissar for Education, Anatoly Lunacharsky [16]. In 1921 a Commission for the Improvement of Children's Lives was created under the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) and chaired by Felix Dzerzhinsky; it controlled canteens, medical points, night shelters and "children's towns" [16]. A typical child's route was described schematically: street, reception-distribution point, orphanage [16].

Despite this institutional activity, a precise legal definition of a "neglected" child was lacking for years. Saktaganova and Karsakova show that from 1917 to 1926 the concept had no clear definition and was interpreted broadly and vaguely; proposals by Gernet, Lyublinsky and Kufaev were partly codified in a circular of the Main Directorate of Social Education of 22 May 1924, but the final official definition was given only by a VTsIK and Council of People's Commissars decree of 8 March 1926 [17]. That decree divided children into two groups: those directly neglected (children under sixteen without parents or capable older siblings, or who had lost contact with them, or who had been removed from the family by a court or a commission for minors) and those requiring "temporary or partial assistance and upbringing measures" because parents or guardians were unable to provide for them [17].

Two implications follow for Turkestan. First, the period studied here (1918–1924) predates the definitive legal definition, so the sources of the Turkestan ASSR use the category loosely and often interchangeably with "orphan", "refugee" or "hungry" child. Second, because Turkestan's Soviet institutions were organised as the regional arm of the all-Russian system, their classification practices cannot be understood without reference to the evolving all-Union categories.

4. Historiography: four traditions

4.1. Soviet-era practitioners

The earliest literature was written in the 1920s by practitioners—pedagogues, jurists and physicians—engaged directly in the struggle against child homelessness. The works of Vasilevsky,

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Lyublinsky and Kopelyanskaya, Poznyshev, Kufaev and Levitina form a primary, though unsystematic, body of testimony and conceptual analysis [8; 9; 10; 12]. Their weaknesses are as instructive as their strengths: they were written in a spirit of reform and, increasingly, of official optimism, and they rarely dealt with Turkestan. Later Soviet historiography tended to present the struggle against child homelessness as an unqualified achievement of socialist construction, obscuring the real scale of the tragedy and the systemic shortcomings of state policy.

4.2. Post-independence Uzbek research

The most substantial specialised study is F. A. Usmanov's doctoral dissertation on child neglect in Uzbekistan in 1917–1945, which analyses children's commissions, the reformatory, school-communes and labour collectors on the basis of a wide range of National Archive documents and proposes a four-stage periodisation (1917–1918, 1918–1920, 1921–1923 and 1941–1945) [24]. Two follow-up articles reconstruct the statistical and demographic portrait of child neglect in the Uzbek SSR in 1926–1928 and examine the role of orphanages, the reformatory and collection points [19; 20]. Their quantitative data—for example, 11,000 neglected children registered in the republic in 1926, of whom 6,826 (62 per cent) were in institutions—form the most complete evidential base currently available [19]. M. F. Khuzhanova's study of orphanages in Uzbekistan in the 1920s–1930s adds detail on the founding of the earliest orphanages in 1918, on land allocation and on conflicts between inmates and staff [21]. Studies of the Turkestan famine by Rakhmatov and Rajabboev supply the economic and food-policy context [15a; 15b], and Mamadaliev's analysis of the Turkestan press documents contemporary public perceptions of starving children [23].

The common limitation of this body of work is chronological. It generally covers wider periods (1917–1945 or the 1920s–1930s) and treats the Turkestan ASSR period as an introductory stage.

4.3. Russian and Kazakh historiography

Slavko's doctoral dissertation periodises the history of Russian child homelessness into four "waves" from the late 1920s to the early 1950s and documents how the network of institutions changed in each [13]. Savelyev and Kostina describe the all-Union institutional foundations: the Lunacharsky council, the Dzerzhinsky commission, reception-distribution points, orphanages, labour communes, school-colonies and children's towns, and provide statistics (3,971 children's institutions with 253,237 inmates in 1923, falling to 1,922 institutions with 158,544 inmates in 1927–1928) [16]. Maslova's work on the liquidation of mass child homelessness in the 1920s is valuable for the terminological debates and for the problem of financing [12]. Kazakh scholarship—Saktaganova and Karsakova on Akmola province, and a 2025 volume of archival documents compiled by Kaipbaeva and colleagues drawing on Kazakh, Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik archives—provides the most important regional comparison and calls explicitly for a Central Asian rather than single-country approach to the subject [17; 18].

4.4. Anglophone Sovietology

Alan Ball's And Now My Soul Is Hardened (1994) remains the most detailed Western monograph. Using memoirs, state documents, statistics and press materials, Ball analyses both the social history of street life and the political history of state policy, and links child homelessness not only to war and famine but also to internal factors such as liberal divorce legislation and unemployment under the New Economic Policy [1]. His earlier article on "state children" examines the ideological function of institutions as instruments for producing the "new Soviet person" [2]. Cameron's study of the Kazakh famine, Buttino's work on economic crisis and depopulation in

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Turkestan, Kamp's analysis of the 1933 famine in Uzbekistan and Stronski's urban history of Tashkent provide indispensable contextual frameworks, although none addresses children's institutions specifically [3; 4; 5; 22]. Taken together, they allow Turkestan to be placed within a comparative field of Soviet and Central Asian studies.

4.5. The gap

This survey reveals a consistent gap. None of the studies treats the educational and rehabilitative institutions peculiar to the Turkestan ASSR as an independent object of research. Three issues in particular remain insufficiently explored: the reformatory under the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, which Usmanov identifies as existing only in Turkestan [20]; the integration of earlier institutions linked to waqf traditions into the Soviet system; and the influence of the national composition of inmates on educational policy.

5. Sources and methodological problems

5.1. Archival sources

The archival base for Turkestan consists chiefly of materials in the National Archive of Uzbekistan (NAU). The documents used in this research include the records of the Turkestan famine-relief commission and its successor (NAU, f. R-17, op. 1, d. 398), materials on the children's commission and placement of children in families (NAU, f. R-25, op. 1, d. 682), documents of the education authorities and inspectorates for minors (NAU, f. R-34, op. 1, dd. 1633, 1781), records of the Council of People's Commissars and its successors on financing (NAU, f. R-86, op. 1, dd. 2581, 2756, 4399, 6699), and the extensive files of the Uzbek commissariat of education (NAU, f. R-94, op. 1 and op. 5). The Tashkent Regional State Archive (f. 530, op. 1, d. 1193) supplements them with local material.

5.2. Published and press sources

Published collections and the periodical press are equally important. Izvestiya of December 1919 and 11 December 1921 recorded the condition of infant homes, and Turkestan newspapers such as Ulug' Turkiston discussed hunger from 1917 onwards [23]. Press accounts are frequently more vivid than official reports, but they must be read critically because they served both as vehicles of public pressure and as instruments of mobilisation. An émigré account such as Zenzinov's Besprizornye (Paris, 1929) offers an outsider's critique of Soviet charitable practice, though not specifically of Turkestan [26].

5.3. Methodological problems

Several problems should be stated openly.

Chronology. Much of the best-documented evidence (for instance, orphanage statistics for 1928–1931 and inspection reports of 1938) comes from the period after 1924. Such data can illuminate earlier trends, but they must be explicitly distinguished from evidence on the Turkestan ASSR itself.

Normative versus actual practice. Regulations such as the 1920 rules on orphanages, the 1920 instruction on admission and the instruction on internal life were prepared within the all-Union education system and are preserved in Kazakh archival collections [17; 18]. Turkestan's institutions, subordinated to the same Main Directorate of Social Education, are presumed to have followed them, but this is an inference that requires confirmation from Uzbek archives, and the gap between the normative ideal and practice is itself a central finding of the research.

Statistical comparability. Figures from different sources and years are not always commensurable. For example, the sum of children placed by the children's commission in six named cities in

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November 1921 (1,582) is far below the reported total of 8,923 children placed in families [25], suggesting that the total included other territories or categories. Such discrepancies should be flagged rather than silently harmonised.

Silences. Archives record admissions, diseases and deaths far better than children's own experiences; systematic data on physical development, on the later lives of inmates, and on gender differences are largely absent. Oral history and memoirs, where they survive, should be sought as a corrective.

6. Adapting the concepts to Turkestan

Three features of Turkestan require adaptation of the vocabulary inherited from Russian scholarship. First, the demographic composition of the neglected population was unusual. In 1926 roughly three-quarters of children found on the streets of Uzbekistan were migrants from the RSFSR, and Russians were the largest group among street children, followed by Uzbeks and Tatars; among orphanage inmates, 51 per cent were Uzbeks and 39 per cent Europeans [19]. "Neglect" therefore encompassed both local children, for whom traditional support networks had weakened, and displaced children from famine-stricken regions.

Second, the relationship between orphanhood and institutionalisation was weaker than the vocabulary implies. Archival data for 1928–1929 show that of 6,500 inmates in orphanages only 39 per cent were true orphans, while more than 40 per cent had at least one living parent [20]. The category of "neglected" child thus served as an administrative gateway to state care for children whose families were destitute, not only for the parentless.

Third, pre-revolutionary institutions of mutual help—waqf-funded charitable establishments, neighbourhood (mahalla) solidarity and extended kinship networks—were part of the background against which Soviet categories were imposed. Their breakdown during 1917–1921 created what may be called an "institutional vacuum" between the old system and the new, in which thousands of children remained without organised assistance.

7. Conclusion

The concepts of "neglected child" and "neglected adolescent" were not stable analytical categories but historically changing legal and social constructs. Absent from official practice before 1917, they became widespread in the post-revolutionary emergency, were given a definitive legal form only in 1926, and acquired a sharper distinction between homelessness and lack of supervision in the mid-1930s. For research on the Turkestan ASSR, this implies a working definition that treats homelessness and neglect as analytically distinct but practically overlapping, that remains sensitive to the broad and loose use of the terms in 1918–1924, and that takes account of the region's migrant and multi-ethnic child population and the legacy of pre-revolutionary welfare practices.

The historiographical survey shows that research on Turkestan has so far been subsumed under broader chronological or national narratives. A source-based study that treats the region's institutions as an object in their own right—and that openly acknowledges the limits of its evidence—can contribute both to Central Asian history and to the comparative history of childhood and welfare in the early Soviet state.

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