



## THE GLOBAL STUDY OF RESISTANCE MOVEMENTS (1918-1934)

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**Abstract:** *This article examines how resistance movements in Turkestan and Central Asia have been studied by Turkish, Russian, and European historians. It analyzes the differing narratives shaped by national identity, ideology, and academic tradition. Turkish historiography emphasizes heroic anti-colonial struggle rooted in shared cultural ties. Russian scholarship has shifted from imperial and Soviet distortions to more balanced post-Soviet perspectives. European historians, meanwhile, have moved from orientalist and strategic interpretations to post-colonial, interdisciplinary analyses. By comparing these schools of thought, the article highlights the importance of diverse historiographical approaches in understanding resistance as both political defiance and a cultural response to empire.*

**Keywords:** *Turkestan, resistance movements, Basmachi, historiography, Turkish scholarship, Russian historiography, European historians, Central Asia, anti-colonialism, post-colonial studies, Soviet legacy, national liberation.*

### INTRODUCTION

Resistance movements have played a vital role in shaping political identities, redefining borders, and challenging imperial powers throughout world history. Whether in the form of armed uprisings, cultural defiance, or ideological opposition, these movements have emerged as powerful responses to colonial domination, authoritarian regimes, and external intervention. In particular, the resistance movements of Central Asia — especially in the regions historically referred to as Turkestan — stand as complex, multi-layered struggles that blended nationalism, religion, and cultural revivalism. Studying such movements is essential not only to understand the historical agency of colonized and oppressed peoples but also to critically assess how global power structures and ideologies influenced regional responses.

The academic study of resistance movements is not neutral; it has been deeply shaped by political agendas, national interests, and ideological frameworks. Different regions of the world have approached the history of Central Asian resistance through distinct lenses. In Turkey, scholars often frame these movements within a broader pan-Turkic or Islamic narrative, highlighting solidarity among Turkic peoples and viewing the resistance as a legitimate anti-colonial struggle. In Russia, particularly during the Soviet era, such movements were usually depicted as reactionary or manipulated by foreign powers, serving to justify Soviet control over the region. Meanwhile, European scholars — especially in the post-colonial era — have analyzed



resistance from a comparative, ethnographic, or ideological standpoint, often placing emphasis on identity, culture, and the legacy of empire .

The diversity in how resistance is interpreted across these regions reveals more than academic preferences; it uncovers how memory, politics, and historical legitimacy are constructed. It shows that resistance is not only a historical phenomenon, but also a subject of ongoing ideological negotiation. This article aims to explore and compare how resistance movements—particularly in Central Asia — have been studied in Turkish, Russian, and European historiography. By tracing key scholars, thematic focuses, and methodological trends, the paper seeks to highlight both commonalities and tensions in global perspectives on resistance.

Understanding how these movements are studied globally not only provides insight into the events themselves but also into the broader dynamics of historical narrative-making, post-colonial thought, and national memory construction. As such, the global study of resistance movements serves as a mirror reflecting both the struggles of the past and the ideologies of those who seek to interpret them.

#### Turkish historical school

The Turkish historiographical tradition has shown a sustained interest in the study of resistance movements, especially those involving Turkic peoples under colonial or foreign rule. One of the most consistent focuses has been the resistance movements in Central Asia and Turkestan during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly under Russian imperialism and Soviet expansion. The

Turkish historical school has approached these movements not only as isolated national struggles but also as part of a broader historical narrative that emphasizes pan-Turkism, Islamic unity, and anti-colonial resistance. This approach reflects both scholarly commitment and ideological solidarity rooted in Turkey's own historical experience and cultural affinity with Central Asia.

The emergence of Turkish interest in Central Asian resistance movements dates back to the late Ottoman period. In the early 20th century, as the Ottoman Empire encountered its own political fragmentation, a growing number of intellectuals began to explore ideas of Turkic unity, known as "Pan-Turanism" or "Pan-Turkism." This ideology proposed a cultural and political union among Turkic peoples from Anatolia to Central Asia. Scholars and thinkers such as Yusuf Akçura, İsmail Gaspıralı, and Ziya Gökalp laid the ideological foundation for this worldview. Though these figures were more political philosophers than historians, their ideas profoundly shaped later historiographical narratives .

In this intellectual atmosphere, Turkestan's resistance movements—such as the Basmachi Rebellion, Alash Orda autonomy movement, and other anti-Russian uprisings—were perceived not merely as local events but as expressions of a pan-Turkic awakening and resistance to imperial oppression. Thus, the Turkish historical school has consistently framed these movements within a shared cultural memory and geopolitical consciousness.



One of the most significant contributors to the Turkish understanding of resistance movements in Central Asia is Zeki Velidi Togan (1890–1970), a Bashkir nationalist, historian, and politician who later settled in Turkey. Togan had first-hand experience with resistance: he participated in the Bashkir national movement against the Bolsheviks and held leadership positions in the short-lived Bashkir government. After fleeing the Soviet Union, he continued his academic career in Europe and later in Turkey, where he became a central figure in Turkish Central Asian studies.

Togan's most influential work, “Bugünkü Türkili (Türkistan) ve Yakın Tarihi” (Modern Turkestan and Its Recent History), is a landmark study of Central Asian political, cultural, and military history. In it, he provides a detailed account of the Basmachi movement, the role of religious leaders, the resistance against Bolshevik forces, and the dynamics of local governance and identity. His approach is unique in that he combines personal testimony, archival research, and Turkic nationalist analysis to create a richly layered historical account.

Togan's work laid the foundation for Turkish historiography on resistance by blending academic rigor with nationalist sympathy. He viewed the Basmachi fighters not as bandits—as the Soviet narrative suggested—but as legitimate patriots and defenders of their homeland. In doing so, Togan redefined the moral framework through which resistance was studied, influencing generations of scholars.

After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the new secular state initially prioritized building a national historical identity centered around Anatolia. However, as diplomatic and academic ties with Turkic republics remained strong, especially during the Cold War and after the collapse of the USSR, Turkey renewed its academic engagement with Turkestan's past.

Key institutions played a vital role in developing this field. The Türk Tarih Kurumu (Turkish Historical Society), Ankara University, Istanbul University, and later Marmara University became centers for the study of Turkic and Central Asian history. Journals such as Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları (Studies of the Turkic World) and Belleten published numerous articles on resistance movements, particularly the Basmachi revolt, portraying it as a national liberation movement.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Turkey witnessed a resurgence of interest in pan-Turkism due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Central Asian republics. This political moment also stimulated a renewed academic focus on resistance in Central Asia. Many Turkish scholars began to reinterpret earlier movements as part of a longer historical trajectory leading toward independence and sovereignty.

In contemporary Turkish historiography, several scholars have continued the tradition established by Togan, enriching it with modern methodologies and new sources. Prof. Dr. Mehmet Saray, for instance, is one of the most prolific writers on the history of Central Asia, especially on Turkestan under Russian and Soviet rule. His works, such as “Rusya'nın Türkistan'ı İstilas ve Türkistan Müslümanlarının Tepkileri”



(Russia's Invasion of Turkestan and the Reactions of the Turkestan Muslims), provide detailed narratives of resistance movements using Russian, Turkish, and Central Asian sources .

Saray emphasizes the religious and cultural dimensions of resistance, arguing that Islam played a crucial role in mobilizing the population. He also challenges the idea—frequently found in Western or Russian historiography—that these uprisings were spontaneous or unorganized. Instead, he posits that many were coordinated efforts rooted in both nationalist and Islamic ideologies.

Other scholars such as Kemal Çiçek, Ahmet Taşağıl, and Necdet Sevinç have also contributed to the understanding of resistance in Central Asia, including studies on leadership figures like Enver Pasha, who tried to revive resistance in Turkestan during the early 1920s. Enver Pasha's efforts to unify Basmachi forces are seen by Turkish historians not merely as a failed military expedition but as a symbol of pan-Turkic solidarity and sacrifice.

The Turkish historical school is distinguished by its sympathetic and identity-driven approach to resistance. While Western or Russian scholars may adopt more detached or critical frameworks, Turkish scholars often emphasize moral legitimacy, cultural continuity, and heroic narratives. This nationalistic tone, while powerful in creating emotional resonance and cultural pride, has occasionally drawn criticism for lacking analytical neutrality or failing to engage with opposing viewpoints or archival depth.

Nonetheless, Turkish scholars have gradually diversified their methodologies. Some have adopted oral history, comparative studies, and multilingual source analysis, enriching the academic depth of the field. A few Turkish historians have begun to collaborate with Central Asian researchers, promoting a more inclusive and transnational approach to historical inquiry.

#### Russian historiography

The Russian approach to studying resistance movements—particularly those in Turkestan and Central Asia—has undergone significant transformations from the imperial era through the Soviet period to the post-Soviet academic landscape. Unlike Turkish historiography, which tends to view resistance as heroic and morally justified, Russian historiography has often approached such movements through ideological, imperial, or Marxist-Leninist frameworks, particularly during the Soviet era. The legacy of Russian domination over Central Asia shaped the narratives produced by its scholars, with resistance frequently depicted as reactionary, disorganized, or driven by “backward” forces. Nonetheless, more nuanced and balanced interpretations have emerged in recent decades, especially following the collapse of the USSR.

During the Tsarist era (18th to early 20th century), Russian scholars and officials often described Central Asia as a “frontier” in need of civilization and order. The conquest of Turkestan was framed as a moral and strategic necessity, with Russian presence portrayed as bringing progress to supposedly underdeveloped regions.



Within this narrative, local uprisings and resistance movements were typically labeled as tribal unrest, fanaticism, or banditry .

Prominent Russian Orientalists such as Vasily Bartold (W. Barthold), while more scholarly and respectful of local cultures than many of their contemporaries, still operated within the imperial paradigm. Barthold's extensive works on the history of Central Asia—including "Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion"—remain essential reading, and he was among the few who recognized the historical depth and cultural achievements of the region. However, his works often avoided framing Central Asian uprisings as legitimate political resistance. Instead, such movements were seen through the lens of ethnographic interest, Islamic studies, or regional instability—not as national liberation struggles.

With the establishment of the Soviet Union, historical research became a powerful tool of state ideology. Under Marxist-Leninist doctrine, the study of history—especially of colonized or previously conquered regions—had to align with the ideological narrative of class struggle, progressive revolution, and Soviet liberation. This framework radically transformed how resistance movements in Central Asia were portrayed.

The most prominent example of this transformation is the treatment of the Basmachi Movement, a wide-ranging anti-Soviet armed resistance that emerged in Turkestan following the Bolshevik Revolution. Soviet historians consistently labeled the Basmachi as "bandits", "reactionaries", or "instruments of foreign imperialist powers"—particularly Britain and Turkey. Their resistance was framed not as a national movement but as a feudal-Islamic counter-revolution opposed to the progress and enlightenment brought by the Soviet regime.

Soviet scholars such as N. A. Khalfin, A. G. Rudenko, and V. V. Bartol'd's successors contributed to this portrayal. They emphasized themes such as the "backwardness" of local populations, the influence of mullahs and landlords, and the inevitability of Soviet victory as part of the historical dialectic. The Basmachi, in this view, were not freedom fighters but obstacles to socialist progress.

Archival control and censorship also played a major role in shaping this narrative.

Many sources were classified, distorted, or destroyed. Oral histories and alternative perspectives—especially those sympathetic to the resistance—were excluded from official accounts. This led to a monolithic historiography in which resistance was essentially "erased" from public legitimacy.

Despite the ideological rigidity, some Soviet-era ethnographers and regional historians did attempt to present more balanced views, though always within acceptable ideological limits. They studied the socio-economic conditions that led to rebellion, the role of tribal structures, or the psychological impacts of war and repression. Yet even these approaches could not fully escape the narrative boundaries set by the Communist Party .



The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 opened the door to a reassessment of Soviet-era historiography. In Russia, as well as in the newly independent Central Asian republics, scholars began to re-evaluate the history of resistance movements from fresh perspectives. This post-Soviet historiographical turn introduced critical reflection, archival re-access, and international collaboration, allowing for a more diverse and balanced understanding.

One significant shift in Russian scholarship is the acknowledgment of imperial violence and the reclassification of some uprisings—such as the 1916 Central Asian Revolt or the Basmachi resistance—as responses to colonialism and repression. While some Russian historians still maintain the traditional line, a growing number have begun to treat these events as legitimate forms of resistance with political, cultural, and ideological motivations.

For example, scholars like Artyom Ulunyan have explored the ideological dimensions of resistance and the broader geopolitical context, including Turkey's and Britain's perceived influence in the region. Meanwhile, Alexander Morrison, a British historian based in Russia and Central Asia, though not ethnically Russian, has used Russian archives extensively and contributed significantly to understanding imperial strategies and local responses.

However, the reassessment has its limits. Political sensitivities still surround topics such as nationalism, Islam, and colonial repression. In recent years, under Putin's regime, there has been a resurgence of imperial nostalgia and state-centered patriotism. This has led to renewed pressure on historians to avoid narratives that might "undermine national unity" or "discredit the achievements of the Soviet Union." As a result, while academic freedom has increased since the Soviet period, it is still shaped by state interests and ideological trends.

One thematic thread that remains constant is the tension between center and periphery, or metropole and colony. Resistance is often interpreted as the product of structural inequalities, imperial neglect, or forced modernization. Recent works have increasingly explored the religious dimensions of resistance, especially the role of Islamic identity, Sufi networks, and local spiritual leaders in mobilizing support.

Russian historiography on resistance movements in Central Asia reflects the broader political and ideological shifts of the Russian state itself. From the imperial justifications of conquest to the Soviet suppression of nationalist memory, and finally to the contested openness of the post-Soviet era, the study of resistance has never been neutral. For decades, Russian scholars depicted resistance as reactionary, fragmented, or foreign-inspired, aligning with imperial or Soviet interests. Yet more recent scholarship has begun to challenge these assumptions, offering more balanced and critical perspectives on events such as the Basmachi movement, the 1916 revolt, and other forms of localized resistance.

Understanding Russian historiography is essential for any global study of resistance movements. It demonstrates how power structures shape historical



narratives and how history itself becomes a site of resistance—against imposed meaning, against silence, and against forgetting. As more collaborative, transnational, and source-diverse studies emerge, the Russian approach continues to evolve, offering both a cautionary tale of ideological distortion and a potential model for scholarly recovery.

#### European historiography

European interest in Central Asian resistance movements—especially during the Tsarist and Soviet periods—has been largely shaped by colonial parallels, geopolitical rivalry with Russia, and a longstanding academic fascination with the “Orient.” Unlike the Turkish or Russian historiographical traditions, which are embedded in national identity or direct regional involvement, the European perspective tends to be more analytical, comparative, and increasingly post-colonial in its approach. Over the past two centuries, European scholars have contributed significantly to documenting, interpreting, and theorizing resistance movements in Turkestan. Their interpretations, however, have varied over time depending on political context, scholarly trends, and access to sources .

During the 19th century, the British Empire, in particular, became deeply interested in Central Asia, primarily as a result of the “Great Game”—the strategic rivalry between Britain and the Russian Empire over influence in Central Asia. British officers, travelers, and Orientalists produced an early wave of European literature on Turkestan. While these works were not strictly historical in the modern academic sense, they often included detailed observations of local uprisings, tribal resistance, and anti-Russian sentiment.

Figures like Arminius Vambéry (a Hungarian scholar and British intelligence collaborator) and Captain Frederick Burnaby offered romanticized, often politicized, portrayals of Central Asian peoples. They viewed local resistance as either heroic defiance or as chaotic tribalism, depending on their geopolitical leanings. These early works laid the foundation for European perceptions of Central Asian resistance, though they lacked methodological rigor.

The Cold War revived European academic interest in Soviet-controlled Central Asia, including the study of historical and contemporary resistance movements. As access to the region remained restricted, many European scholars based their studies on émigré accounts, Soviet publications, and Western intelligence reports. This created both a wealth of speculative analysis and a need for methodological caution.

In France, scholars such as Jacques Gernet and Maxime Rodinson contributed to Islamic and Oriental studies that indirectly informed the understanding of Muslim resistance movements. Although they did not specialize in Central Asia, their theoretical insights on Islamic societies under colonial rule proved influential.

In Britain and Germany, academic centers began producing more focused studies. For instance, Geoffrey Wheeler, a British historian, wrote extensively on Russian policy in Central Asia, including works like “The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia”



(1964), where he analyzed resistance movements—particularly the Basmachi—as reactions to Soviet consolidation. While Wheeler stopped short of endorsing nationalist narratives, he acknowledged the complexity and legitimacy of resistance in certain contexts. His work was among the first to question Soviet portrayals of these movements as mere criminality.

German scholars like Hans-Joachim Klimkeit and Joachim Gierlichs delved into religious and ethnographic aspects of Central Asia. Their work often highlighted the role of Islam, Sufi brotherhoods, and tribal loyalties in sustaining resistance. These contributions began to depart from both the Soviet narrative and early European exoticism, moving toward a more interdisciplinary and culturally sensitive approach.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought about a sea change in European historiography on Central Asia. Access to archives, oral testimonies, and local scholars allowed European researchers to revise older narratives and to produce new, empirically grounded studies. At the same time, post-colonial theory—gaining traction in European academia—began to influence interpretations of resistance movements.

Key among these scholars is Adeeb Khalid, an Uzbek-born American historian educated and affiliated with both European and U.S. academic institutions. While not European by passport, Khalid's impact on European discourse has been immense. His seminal books "The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform" (1998) and "Making Uzbekistan" (2015) address the ideological and cultural dimensions of resistance, particularly in the form of Jadidism and anti-Soviet sentiment.

Another major contributor is Alexander Morrison, a British historian who specializes in Russian imperialism in Central Asia. His recent monograph "The Russian Conquest of Central Asia" (2020) is a meticulously researched, archivally grounded work that examines both imperial strategies and local responses. Morrison avoids nationalist simplifications and instead explores the political, military, and cultural dynamics of resistance. His treatment of the Basmachi movement is especially notable for rejecting both the Soviet "bandit" label and the romantic nationalist narrative, offering instead a multi-causal analysis.

French scholars such as Sophie Roche and Didier Chaudet have also examined Central Asian identity formation, memory of violence, and historical consciousness. Their work often includes fieldwork and analysis of post-Soviet historiography in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. These researchers highlight how resistance movements have been re-appropriated in national myth-making, often selectively, by new regimes.

European historiography has evolved from romanticized travelogues and imperial strategy accounts to a mature, interdisciplinary field that recognizes the complexity of resistance movements in Central Asia. Whether through Cold War skepticism, post-Soviet archival revelations, or post-colonial theory, European scholars have enriched the global understanding of how colonialism, identity, and ideology intersect in moments of revolt.



### Conclusion

Taken together, these three historiographical traditions underscore the importance of context in shaping historical interpretation. Each brings unique strengths: Turkey offers emotional and cultural closeness; Russia provides access to deep archival materials and internal narratives; and Europe contributes theoretical innovation and comparative insight. Yet each also carries limitations—be it nationalist idealization, ideological rigidity, or outsider detachment.

A global study of resistance movements must therefore engage with all three traditions critically and constructively. It must recognize that resistance was not merely a series of armed uprisings, but a deeply human response to colonization, dispossession, and cultural erasure. It must also acknowledge that history itself is a battlefield — where narratives are constructed, erased, and reclaimed.

By integrating Turkish passion, Russian archives, and European analysis, scholars can move toward a more balanced, ethical, and inclusive understanding of the resistance movements that shaped Central Asia's modern history. These movements are not relics of the past; they are foundational to the region's identity and memory. As such, they deserve to be studied with scholarly rigor, moral clarity, and above all, respect for the voices that once refused to be silenced.

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