

Unemployment in the Area of Construction of the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad

Lashyn Abdildinova¹, Nazym Kassymova², Kulimkoz Santayeva³, Albina Abdildanova⁴, and Zhadyra Kalelova⁵

Abstract

It is important to underline the relevance and role of the Turkish railroad construction in the early twentieth century, one of the most ambitious transport projects of those times. It was a unique project which connected Asia and Siberia. From the beginning of the construction of the Turkestan-Siberian Railway (Turksib), controversy began with construction and the labour force. This study explores the characteristics of the construction of Turksib with a focus on labour migration and labour law. The article deals with the archival materials of the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan. The results of this study will be useful as a basis for further research into the regions' demographics and the characteristics of railroads and construction employment.

Keywords: Industrialization; unemployment; railroad; labour force; labour migration

Introduction

Rail transport in its modern sense originated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, although the first gauge roads existed as far back as Ancient Rome. Railroads quickly became the main mode of transport for many countries. During the nineteenth and the first third of the twentieth century, the length of the world's rail network grew rapidly, and today there are almost 1.3 million kilometers. Like many other industrial projects implemented by the USSR in the 20-30s, the Turksib was conceived at the end of the 19th century. At the time of the rapid development of the railroads, tsarist officials and businessmen thought of connecting Siberia and Turkestan Governorate-General Territory by railroads. This would have helped to establish the marketing of grain from Siberia and Semirechye and, at the same time, facilitate the export of Turkestan cotton to Siberia. There was also a military-political calculation – the new railroad would help strengthen Russia's military presence near the Chinese border (History of Turksib construction, 1999). The Turksib was the pioneer of socialist industrialization. The construction of the Turksib, which unfolded and ended ahead of schedule at a time when the capitalist world was in a deep economic crisis (and famine in

¹ Lashyn Abdildinova, Higher School of Humanities, Zhetysu University named after I. Zhansugurov, Taldykorgan, Republic of Kazakhstan. E-mail: abdildinova9044-1@nuos.pro

² Nazym Kassymova, Higher School of Humanities, Zhetysu University named after I. Zhansugurov, Taldykorgan, Republic of Kazakhstan. E-mail: n.kassymova@tanu.pro

³ Kulimkoz Santayeva, Higher School of Humanities, Zhetysu University named after I. Zhansugurov, Taldykorgan, Republic of Kazakhstan. E-mail: santayeva-k@delfttech.eu

⁴ Albina Abdildanova, Higher School of Humanities, Zhetysu University named after I. Zhansugurov, Taldykorgan, Republic of Kazakhstan. E-mail: al-abdildanova@kaiost.cn

⁵ Zhadyra Kalelova, Higher School of Humanities, Zhetysu University named after I. Zhansugurov, Taldykorgan, Republic of Kazakhstan. E-mail: zh_kalelova@uohk.com.cn



Kazakhstan), clearly showed the fox and vitality of the planned socialist system of economy, the great advantages of the Soviet social and state system.

In the winter of 1927-1928, the network of “correspondent points” was considerably expanded, following the example of 1927 (The legendary Turksib, 2018). A large group of Communists was sent to auls and villages to carry out propaganda work. A special instruction on hiring Kazakh peasants was issued. The Turkestan-Siberian Railway, or Turksib, was one of the largest construction projects of the first Five Year Plan of the Soviet Union. As the American historian Matthew Payne’s (2001a) book, “Stalin’s Railroad. Turksib and the Construction of Socialism”, the Turksib was a symbol of the struggle against the economic “backwardness” of the Asian republics of the USSR, as well as a powerful metaphor for the creation of a unified socialist nation. The Turksib construction project, which ran from December 1926 to January 1931, involved nearly 50000 workers and cost more than 161 million rubles (Sattarov, 2021). The project embodied the Bolsheviks’ commitment to eradicating ethnic inequality and promoting a cultural revolution in one of the remotest corners of the old tsarist empire, Kazakhstan. The railroad, proclaimed “the forge of Kazakhstan’s proletariat”, was to create a local working class, delivering not only trains to the steppes, but also the revolution.

The planning process for the Turksib lasted decades and involved supplying Siberian grain to Central Asian cotton producers so that more arable land could be used to grow cotton. In a sense, the railroad was a continuation of Tsarist colonial policy, under which Central Asia was seen as a mining territory. But on the other hand, it was a product of local party leaders who lobbied Moscow and the State plan to build transport infrastructure to support industrialization and, what was considered a very important political task in the 1920s, to create a local proletariat (The legendary Turksib, 2018). The Turksib was the last great example of the “railway imperialism” of Tsarist times, and also one of the greatest construction projects of Stalinist industrialization for both of these reasons (Turksib: A road of uncertain destinations, 2021; State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan; Kaliyev, 1997).

The purpose of the article is to study how the construction of Turksib took place and analyze its characteristic features in the aspect of labour migration and labour law.

Korenization as an important goal on Turksib

Korenization, also known as indigenization, is the process of recruiting local people into the labour force in provinces with unique cultures. The builders were of very different social backgrounds. Almost all of the Kazakhs who were usually hired as unskilled labourers were recent nomads. Other occupations were dominated by Russian workers from cities in Siberia and European Russia or Ukrainian peasants (Zapototskyi, 2017; Kortukova, 2021). The most skilled workers were often railroad workers with many years of experience. It was a fluid mix of ethnic groups, classes, and professional experience. Korenization was a very important goal on the Turksib, so labour recruitment was aimed at a quota of local recruitment from the Kazakh population. At the same time, the Soviet Union suffered from high unemployment during the New economic polity years, so thousands of workers from all over the Soviet Union came to the railway stations in search of work. A third group of workers, such as the embankment crews, were hired by the Turksib administration in places as far as Ukraine which is thousands of kilometers away from construction site. Again, the composition of the labour



force was extremely diverse, as was typical of jobs in the Five-Year Plan. For this reason, it can be called a motley workforce (Railroad unemployment..., 1975).

There were many strikes and conflicts, large and small, at the Turksib construction site. The strikes, usually held at a single workplace, were related to very difficult working conditions. However, these riots failed to maintain European domination of the construction site, as the regime was actively engaged in the political project of proletarianizing the Kazakhs as part of the policy of korenization (The legendary Turksib, 2018). The pogroms were stopped by criminal prosecution, and the policy of hiring Kazakhs was preserved, though not at the level the local party leadership would have liked (Kirsanova & Lenkovets, 2019; Ostry et al., 2001).

If there were 2904 people in Frunze city since the middle of March, then by 18/IV there were 3964 people in Frunze city. As of 1/IV in Alma-Ata city, there were 3516 unemployed, by 5/IV there were 3960 of them, and 530 were again registered by 5-10/IV, as of 11/IV after the cleaned Labour Day, there were 3071 unemployed in the registry. In Semipalatinsk city, as of 1/IV, there were 6088 unemployed people on the records of B/L. According to the latest data, their number is up to 8000 people. In addition, 2000 unemployed people have piled up in Sergiopol. In addition to those registered, there are more than 1000 seasonal workers in Frunze who are not on the labour registry; there are also a large number of unregistered, self-reported workers who have never been employed in Alma-Ata and Sempalatinsk. The bulk of the unemployed are unskilled workers. There are relatively few workers with construction qualifications (carpenters, bricklayers, painters, etc.). So, in Semipalatinsk there are only 625 qualified workers, in Alma-Ata – 468 people. Situation of unemployed for a month. Arriving unemployed go to institutions, demanding work or sending them back at the expense of the state. But neither of them can be satisfied (Kleespies, 2018; Payne, 2001b; Reid, 2017).

Meanwhile, in the city of Alma-Ata, with disruptions in supply of the urban population with bread and other products of prime necessity, the growth of the unemployed causes great difficulties in this matter, increasing the questioning, the philistine seeking to build stocks, due to the general shortage of commodities of wide consumption. This situation causes discontent among the unemployed. In anticipation of a possible influx of seasonal construction workers, the regional party and Soviet governing bodies gave a number of instructions to the body interested in construction to prepare for the construction season. However, the beginning of the influx was met with complete unpreparedness for timely deployment of construction work planned for the coming season, and to attract to the work the required number of labour force on the number of arriving seasonal builders.

At the same time, the influx of seasonal builders is growing. In particular, despite the widespread announcement of the cessation of admission and refusal to register, the Alma-Ata organization of the Union of Builders is forced to register /in the first 10 days of April/ up to 50-60 arriving unemployed every day (Turksib: A road of uncertain destination, 2021; State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan). In the absence of jobs, the unemployed seasonal workers penetrate directly to the Turksib construction sites and demand employment there, threatening to be beaten otherwise, which aggravates the situation with the unemployed at Turksib in general. The material and living conditions of the seasonal construction workers do not differ from the general contingent of the unemployed.

Based on the decisions of the meeting, the Committee on National Labour and the United State Political Administration sent directives by telegraph to Chimkent, Semipalatinsk and Alma-Ata not to register black labourers arriving irregularly, not to give out unemployment benefits and to send a worker to work on the labour market. Alma-Ata Labour was asked to solve the question on the spot about the order of unloading the labour market and about issuing preferential tickets to returnees. There was a telegraphic request to People's Commissariat labour Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic to make a telegraphic order to all Labour Department, categorically forbidding to deregister the unemployed who were leaving to work on the Turksib. In addition to telegraphic directives, to Petropavlovsk, Chimkent, Alma-Ata and Semipalatinsk Labour Department wrote a letter with the need to immediately implement the decision of the Council of People's Commissars of 26/III – 29 years.

Turksib employment issues

A warning was sent to all newspaper editorial boards and to the heads of railway junction stations about the impossibility of giving them jobs on the Turksib. KSPC (Kolpashevo Socio-Industrial College) sent a special person to Arys station on the line of the pro-forma workers to organize propaganda and explanatory work. The Semipalatinsk regional committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Kazakhstan twice discussed the problem of unemployment and gave a number of specific instructions to ease the situation with the unemployed. However, this issue has not been given proper attention by the Organizational Department of Labour. There is still no clear guidance and monitoring of the movement of labour. The People's Commissariat Labour Department, which was limited in Sergiopol, has no control and directives on the labour line, and the workers of the Department work blindly. The Alma-Ata District Committee of the All-Union Communist Party also deals with this issue repeatedly, trying to prevent an influx of the unemployed and reduce the contingent; those registered with the Labour Exchange. In order to serve the unemployed as quickly as possible, the Labour Department opened a branch of People's Commissariat Labour on the outskirts of the city, where the labourers' section was moved. A member of the Central Committee of the Union of Builders was sent to the city of Frunze to prevent infiltration of the unemployed in the Alma-Ata district (Satish, Chandra, & Harish, 2012; Kulchytskyi, 2014; Holonič et al., 2020).

Completely insignificant, against the Treaty, reception of the unemployed by the Turksib of Frunze labour market and extension of the contractual terms of reception of manpower, fundamentally failed. The pegging of the labour market put the People's Commissariat of Labour under the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in a forced position. The republican organs have now taken this question to the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party of Bolsheviks in order to resolve it through the People's Commissariat of Railways (State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan). In order to identify the labour element and to unload the Labour Exchanges in Semipalatinsk and Alma-Ata, the latter were cleaned. Cleaning of Semipalatinsk Labour Exchange, due to negligent attitude to the work on the part of the apparatus, but it made positive results and the number of people removed from the register was only 45 people. At present, the People's Commissariat of labour exchanges are starting to purge for the second time. In the city of Alma-Ata this case was treated much more seriously and carefully. As a result of the purge, 1,425 people were removed from the Labour Exchange account. It should be noted that the unemployed masses treated the purge with



kindness. On the part of the unemployed, the Labour Exchange have received and continue to receive statements about the presence of merchants, landlords and non-labour and alien elements among the unemployed.

The incessant influx and the lack of opportunities to use both those arriving and those on the register for work create discontent among the unemployed, which is used by the anti-Soviet element through agitation against Soviet power and subversion. There are cases of rebellion and threats of beatings by social workers among Semipalatians and Dzhakentians, who used to work in Sergiopol and migrated to Alma-Ata in the number of 200 people.

At Alma-Ata People's Commissariat of labour the unemployed Sheyan, a former white officer, a dispossessed man, gathered a crowd of unemployed people around him and told them: "At the moment there is a strong ferment in Central Russia, a period of strikes has begun. The workers and peasants, robbed by the Soviet authorities, are terribly indignant at the bullying. It is becoming impossible to live any longer. The fire of the people's anger is flaring up and will soon blaze up. God willing, this gang of "Russian Versailles" will soon be dispersed". There, the unemployed Nobleman, among several unemployed people, said: "I have been a member of the Communist Party for 10 years and was expelled in 1928, so the party is not ... the proletariat. Roundly populated, the power was transferred its new bourgeoisie only warms its hands. Here Power has exiled Comrade Trotsky abroad, but he will be no worse off there; anyway, Power pays him 4,000 rubles a month. One thing we have to regret is that he failed to accomplish his task for a little while. In Turkestan, he took 20,000 men. If he was now, he could recruit more unemployed and shake up this power". In Semipalatinsk, the unemployed Smailov, reading in the dormitory a newspaper article about Belarus entering Poland, said to his surrounding unemployed: "And how are we better off? As we used to be under the cane by the Belarusians, here the Communists are mocking them. They are trying to satisfy only the Red Army, at least to the detriment of the working class, but let's see, before the war, they will call for the old years, everyone will go, defending their own interests, not the interests of the Communists" (State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan). There-also in dorm No. 2, the unemployed Ignatin and Zaitsev agitate almost daily that: "Such unemployment is thanks to Soviet Power. There is no order, there is a bureaucrat on a bureaucrat, this is not power, but a gang of crooks who are leading the entire population by the nose and the workers" (Abdelatif et al., 2015; Nguyen, 2019).

Unemployed Babitsky, a local philistine in the city of Alma-Ata, told a group of unemployed people around him: "It is necessary to make a second revolution to kill all the commissars and establish life in their own way, because the Communists have taken the places of the nobility, settled in good places, together with their wives, and we have no work". On 31/III, a group of 20 unemployed people gathered in the courtyard of the People's Commissariat of labour and talked: "They do not take us into account, you will not get a good job from them, we have to organize a pogrom, break the People's Commissariat of labour, drag the employees, drag them by the neck, around the city, then they will rather give work". Similar pogrom agitation was observed in Frunze and Semipalatinsk. On 16/IV – s.c., near the building of the Labour Exchange in the city of Frunze, an unemployed man (F.N.) urged the other unemployed to gather around him: In Semipalatinsk, the unemployed Semibratov, among other unemployed, said: "Nothing good and it will be difficult to get work, if we do not do as we did in the truest year, we must beat and smash and force who should reckon with the unemployed. There, too, manifestations of threats had a more serious nature". In the map, 4

unemployed ringleaders, taking with them a group of unemployed, 20 people, burst into the premises of the Labour Exchange and leveraging the squarest armor began to exercise with the employees of the exchange murder.

Along with anti-Soviet outbursts, there were cases of interethnic antagonism. In Alma-Ata, the unemployed Babitsky showed his discontent with the fact that – all power is in the hands of the Kyrgyz, who are sent to work in the first place. At this time, one of the unemployed hit a Cossack who was standing near him. There was a big scandal, which was eliminated by the Komsomol and Communists, who were present at the exchange (Payne, 2001b).

The most active manifestation of the discontent of the unemployed in Sergiopol, where on 24/IV, they vandalized the police building, broke windows, stole vodka and fought with the Cossacks guarding the bridges. In connection with the recent speeches of the unemployed in Sergiopol and the detection of criminal gangsterism in Semipalatinsk, the Krai's governing bodies have taken a number of measures (State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan). As information, we hereby inform you that after the work of the commission sent from Semipalatinsk to Sergiopol, the situation of the unemployed is improving. Members of the Union are provided with lodging and food; the peasants of neighbouring villages are dispersed to their homes. There are 440 unemployed people left on the records of the Labour Exchange (State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan). In Semipalatinsk, after the removal of the criminal element, there is comparative calm. However, due to the impossibility of using all the unemployed.

All cases of active dissatisfaction on the part of the unemployed, such as the established orders and others, arise from the insufficient demand for labour. With the onset of summer, when with the usual expansion of all kinds of work increases and the demand for labour, the unemployed, given these in the presence of low demand, suspect that not all incoming demands are announced. Among the unemployed (Alma-Ata) of unskilled labour in connection with the measures taken to attract the indigenous population to the construction of the Turksib, there is discontent that Cossacks are sent and Russians are refused. The unemployed mass has a very big pull to enter the works of Turksib construction, why there are often cases of refusal to get jobs in other construction and economic institutions (Alma-Ata) (State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan).

At Alma-Ata labour exchange, there was a big influx of local peasants, who insistently demanded to be registered and sent to work at Turksib construction. According to the regulation of NKT RSFSR (People's Commissary of Labour of The USSR) No. 61 about the order of registration and sending to work, those who were rejected went away to collect the documents, which could be used to get registered at the local exchange. Drunkenness, debauchery, prostitution and other unhealthy phenomena of mass character are not present at People's Commissariat of Labour (all People's Commissariat of Labour reports), but individual cases were recorded as a consequence of decreasing demand for workers.

Working at the exchange is becoming more and more difficult (Uralsk). Among the unemployed since April, more than 25 people increased political exiles and emigrants, as well as those released from the provincial isolator. On the part of the latter, especially impudent behaviour. They came up with fists to the staff of the B/L saying: "I don't care, I will go back to prison, it will be worse for me there than here". In August a whole artel of construction workers, all in a drunken state, came to the premises of the People's Commissariat of Labour



office (State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan). At the exchange, they started shouting resentment that their interests were not protected, etc., which by the end began to take the active form of debauchery.

Unemployment rallies

A meeting of the unemployed was called by the Department of Labour. From the speeches, it became clear: all the demands are for a personal desire to get a job. It turned out that there was a proposal to replace the staff of the exchange from among the “unemployed” with the shouts: “They will protect us”. The composition of the unemployed is not at all what it was two years ago. Lately, enterprises and institutions have given due attention to the selection of workers and employees, and the weak and unnecessary have been weeded out. The majority of the 2800 people on the exchange were: peonage, those fired for not complying with labour discipline, drunkenness, smugglers, those released from correctional labour houses, etc. There may be only 20-25% of genuine workers and clerks (State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan).

Regarding the growth of the Kazakh labour force in construction, it should be said that for this season in 1929, we should have at least 35% of the Kazakh labour force in construction, to the total number of workers employed on the Northern Turksib. This directive task was fulfilled in the following way: in the 1929 construction season, the average percentage of the Kazakh work force for the season was 18.1%; the growth of the Kazakh was noticeable, but still, this was not enough. The quality of the labour force in terms of its social composition is characterized by the predominant number of the hulking part of the Kazakh population. A large part of the Kazakh labour force has sufficient work experience in the auls, and part has acquired production experience at the Turksib; all this has facilitated the possibility of involvement of the Kazakh labour force in the Union and increased the percentage of membership from the Cossacks, to the total membership (The legendary Turksib, 2018).

During the past season, due to a sharp turnaround in the attitude of the working masses and union units toward all those hindering the fulfillment of combat tasks according to the plan, the percentage of those excluded from the Union has increased significantly. We have exclusion from the Union for the following reasons: inciting national enmity, sabotage of production, malicious violation of labour discipline, ignoring union organizations and discrediting them, anti-Soviet tricks, embezzlement, etc. (Kaliyev, 1997; Hercog and Sandoz, 2018). All exclusions from the Union were carried out on the workers themselves through general meetings in the field, with subsequent approval of the board of the Line Department. The increase in Union membership as of April 1, 1930, is characterized as follows: compared with the previous increase in membership by 2.100 people, mostly at the expense of permanent workers and some of the Kazakh workers formerly employed in the villages and auls (Kaliyev, 1997).

As of January 1, 1929, the Line department had a total of 248 people, of whom 217 were Cossacks, which is 4.3% of the accounting asset and the total number of workers. During the season, the total number of people sent to the line was trained executives 76 people, according to the 1st of July there were 555/51 trade union activists (Kaliyev, 1997). Thus, we have an undoubted growth of trade union activists, as a result of systematic training. From number of trade union activists passed through special professional courses for leading professional workers, in 1929, 53 persons, from them 27 persons were Cossacks. In addition, due to the

timely question to the party and professional organizations about strengthening, a number of workers from the center and from the district (6 people) were nominated to especially responsible points of work. Nevertheless, the Line Department considers the cadre of trade union activists to be still lacking. A hierarchical organization was required by the conditions of Turksib – the creation of a permanent cadre of the Cossack proletariat and serving their cultural and domestic needs in their native language.

The state of mass work. The past season in the union work was a breakthrough in terms of improving all mass work, in terms of increasing the activity of the working masses. The main points of the work of the general meetings were questions of construction and questions of practical workplaces in the reserve of the political tasks before us. This increased the attendance of general meetings from 60 to 85 % of the union membership. The speeches of the workers were of concrete, businesslike nature about shortcomings in the economic and Union work, and the workers themselves rebuffed elements of rip-off sentiments. The meetings were held regularly. The main disadvantages of the work of the general meetings were the weak elaboration of questions of the agenda by the republic itself, especially in the part of economic and political questions (Kaliyev, 1997; Nartyuk, 2018). Moreover, the work of the institute of delegates was still weak: the institute of delegates had not yet acquired the importance of a link between builders and groups of union members working on the lines.

Conclusions

The processes of korenization in the USSR are clearly reflected through the history of the construction of the Turksib railway. The involvement of the local population in the construction has affected the demographic and economic situation in the region. The key goal of korenization was the introduction of national workers into the employment of various fields. As can be seen from the results of the study, the key problems were unemployment, strikes, pogroms, and difficulties in interacting with criminal elements.

As already mentioned, the construction of Turksib was associated with overcoming climatic, technical and organizational difficulties. The route passed through the desert and semi-desert areas with a sharply continental climate. Summer heat exceeded +60°C, in winter – long blizzards and frosts more than -40°C. Constructors had a lot of difficulties because of the untimely delivery of materials. Truck transport was very expensive, and there were not enough horses and camels. And a horse-drawn wagon was needed for transportation of one log. The weather also did not please Turksib workers – not a single rain fell for more than six months.

Although the number of workers on Turksib was growing rapidly, having reached 45-50 thousand people by the beginning of 1930, there were not enough workers. It was necessary to attract the local population to the construction additionally. The Komsomol and the youth provided invaluable assistance in this. They deployed a lot of organizational work. Dozens of Young Communist League agitators were sent to the auls and villages adjacent to the route. They told about the construction and the good changes it would bring.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turksib became part of the state enterprise “National Railway Company of Kazakhstan”. Part of the tracks were dismantled to construct new railway lines more appropriate to the new independent state.



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