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Published in the USA

European Journal of Contemporary Education
E-ISSN 2305-6746
2023. 12(4): 1526-1531
DOI: 10.13187/ejced.2023.4.1526
<https://ejce.cherkasgu.press>

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**European Journal of
Contemporary Education**



ELECTRONIC JOURNAL

The System of Public Education in Semirechenskaya Oblast (1867–1917)

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Abstract

This work examines the system of public education in Semirechenskaya Oblast in the period 1867–1917, i.e. from the formation of this territorial unit to the collapse of the Russian Empire.

The principal sources for this study are relevant documents from the Russian State Historical Archive (Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation) and a vast body of statistical information for the prerevolutionary period gathered by the Semirechenskaya Oblast Statistics Committee. The archival materials are represented by relevant documents from Holding No. 733 ('Department of Public Education at the Ministry of Public Education'), while the statistical materials are derived from *The Semirechenskaya Oblast Review*, *The Memorandum Book for Semirechenskaya Oblast*, and *The Address Calendar for Semirechenskaya Oblast*.

The study's findings revealed that during the imperial period, the development of the system of public education in Semirechenskaya Oblast was governed by a regional factor – the majority of the region's population being Muslim. It was difficult to overcome the reluctance of members of the region's Muslim community to have their children attend secular schools, so the Russian local administration set itself the objective of having as many children in the region's ethnic-Russian community as possible attend school. In the period from 1867 to 1917, Semirechenskaya Oblast saw the creation of an entire network of secondary and lower educational institutions, which included male and female gymnasiums and progymnasiums, higher primary schools, parochial schools, primary schools under the purview of the Ministry of Public Education, and lower vocational

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schools (those of horticulture, forestry, and gardening). There also was a teacher's seminary, which helped address the need for qualified teachers in the region.

Keywords: Semirechenskaya Oblast, Russian Empire, public education, period 1867–1917, Ministry of Public Education.

1. Introduction

Semirechenskaya Oblast was formed in 1867. Its capital was the city of Verny. In 1869, its population had the following religious composition: Orthodox Christians – 32,000, Muslims – 495,000, and pagans – 11,000 ([Statisticheskie svedeniya..., 1870: 24-25](#)). At the start of the 20th century, Semirechenskaya Oblast was part of the West Siberian Educational District, formed in 1885. Besides the oblast, the educational district incorporated Tomsk and Tobolsk Governorates and Akmolinsk and Semipalatinsk Oblasts. At the end of the 19th century, Semirechenskaya Oblast had a population of about 990,000 (531,000 males and 458,000 females) ([Cherkasov, 2023: 1690](#)).

2. Materials and methods

The principal sources for this study are relevant documents from the Russian State Historical Archive (Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation) and a vast body of statistical information for the prerevolutionary period gathered by the Semirechenskaya Oblast Statistics Committee. The archival materials are represented by relevant documents from Holding No. 733 ('Department of Public Education at the Ministry of Public Education'), while the statistical materials are derived from *The Semirechenskaya Oblast Review*, *The Memorandum Book for Semirechenskaya Oblast*, and *The Address Calendar for Semirechenskaya Oblast*.

Methodologically, use was made of the historical-statistical and content-analysis methods. The use of these methods helped conduct an objective analysis of the subject based on carefully selected and systematized materials on public education in Semirechenskaya Oblast in 1867–1917.

3. Discussion

The historiography on public education in Semirechenskaya Oblast is relatively thin, and that is for a couple of reasons – one being that during the Soviet period it was not encouraged to extol the successes of the public education sector in the Russian Empire and the authorities advanced a discourse that depicted prerevolutionary Russia as having had high illiteracy rates; plus, during the post-Soviet period the region came to be divided between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, with many historians in these two countries coming to associate the imperial past with the colonial policy of Tsarism and it becoming customary to view it in a negative light or just keep quiet about it, as during the era of Soviet power.

Particularly notable in the last respect is the work by M.Ye. Abdrakhim, which explores colonial education in Semirechenskaya Oblast in the prerevolutionary period ([Abdrakhim, 2023](#)). It is focused on the education of the indigenous population exclusively, with little to no attention given to that of other ethnic groups in the region. The subject of Kazakh translators in Semirechenskaya Oblast is explored in the work by G.S. Sultangaliyeva and M.Ye. Abdrakhim ([Sultangaliyeva, Abdrakhim, 2020](#)). (Translator courses were offered at a male gymnasium in the city of Verny beginning in the 1870s.) The operation of particular educational institutions in the city of Pishpek, Semirechenskaya Oblast, is examined in the work by Y.B. Sabirova ([Sabirova, 2016](#)). Records management practices in Semirechenskaya Oblast in the imperial period are investigated in the work by F.N. Miymanbayeva and her colleagues ([Miymanbaeva et al., 2020](#)).

Research consideration has also been given to a number of other aspects of the history of Semirechenskaya Oblast. For instance, the work by V.A. Skopa investigates the subject of statistical surveys of the Governor-Generalship of the Steppes in the period between the late 19th and early 20th centuries ([Skopa, 2020](#)), the one by T.T. Syrdybayev examines the making of the polyethnic populated localities in the oblast in the mid-19th century ([Syrdybaev, 2020](#)), and the one by S.Ch. Zhumaliyeva and S.I. Tokobayev explores employment in Semirechenskaya Oblast based on findings from the First All-Russian Census of 1897 ([Zhumaliyeva, Tokobaev, 2019](#)).

Given the fact that the bulk of the population of Semirechenskaya Oblast, an Asian territory, was made up of members of non-ethnic-Russian ethnicities, this historiographical review is primarily focused on the systems of public education in regions with similar population compositions in the Caucasus and Central Asia. More specifically, the system of public education in Amur Oblast is explored in the work by N.A. Shevchenko and her colleagues ([Shevchenko et al.,](#)

2023); the ones by T.A. Magsumov and his colleagues examine the development of the system of public education in the territory of the Orenburg Cossack Host (Magsumov, Zulfugarzade, 2020; Magsumov et al., 2020); the one by A.M. Mamadaliyev and his colleagues discusses the system of public education in the Caucasus's Sukhumi District (Mamadaliyev et al., 2022); the ones by G. Rajović and his colleagues are focused on the system of public education in another Caucasus region, Dagestan Oblast (Rajović et al., 2022; Rajović et al., 2022a; Rajović et al., 2022b). Parochial education across the Russian Empire is investigated in the work by A.A. Cherkasov and M. Šmigel' (Cherkasov, Smigel, 2016).

4. Results

Virtually from the moment Semirechenskaya Oblast was formed, the Ministry of Public Education, the Ecclesiastical Department, and the Ministry of Arable Farming and State Properties were each engaged in building networks of educational institutions of their own there.

Educational institutions the Ministry of Public Education

The network of educational institutions under the Ministry of Public Education was created taking into account the region's following distinctive characteristic – its overwhelmingly large Kirghiz-Kazakh population there. Besides gymnasiums, the Ministry of Public Education also established there educational institutions such as urban, parish, and Russo-indigenous schools.

On July 1, 1876, the oblast's capital, Verny, became home to a four-grade male gymnasium. In 1881, the facility was reorganized as a six-grade gymnasium, and in 1901 – as an eight-grade one. In 1904, the gymnasium had an enrollment of 321 students, with 46 % of these being children of nobles and functionaries, 19 % – children of urban commoners, 15 % – children of Cossacks, and 9 % – children of persons of ecclesiastical status. Kirghiz boys began to enroll in the gymnasium as soon as it opened up. By 1905, the facility had just a few students who had completed the entire program, with the rest failing out after fourth or fifth grade (Pamyatnaya knizhka..., 1905: 249). In 1911, the gymnasium had an enrollment of 347 students, with 241 of these being residents of the city of Verny and 106 – residents of the region's uyezds (Obzor..., 1911: 105). By 1913, the size of the student body at the gymnasium had increased just a little – to 361. The social-estate composition of the student body remained virtually unchanged. As at 1913, the gymnasium enrolled 13 Kirghiz children (Obzor..., 1915: 105).

On March 1, 1877, Verny became home to a three-grade female gymnasium. As early as 1879, the facility was reorganized as an eight-grade gymnasium. In 1904, the gymnasium had an enrollment of 317 students, with 66 % of these being children of nobles and functionaries, 17 % – children of urban commoners, 6 % – children of persons of ecclesiastical status, 5 % – children of Cossacks, and the rest – members of other groups. Kirghiz girls began to enroll in the gymnasium only in 1900 (Pamyatnaya knizhka..., 1905: 252). In 1910, the facility had an enrollment of 471 (Obzor..., 1911: 106). In 1913, the figure was 476 students (Obzor..., 1915: 106).

In 1911, the city of Przhhevsk became home to a female four-grade progymnasium. In 1914, the facility had an enrollment of 86 (Obzor..., 1915: 107).

In 1912, the city of Pishpek became home to a male four-grade gymnasium. In 1914, the facility had an enrollment of 100 students, with 35 of these being children of nobles and functionaries, 27 – children of peasants, 20 – children of urban commoners, seven – children of persons of ecclesiastical status, and the rest – members of other groups (Obzor..., 1915: 106).

On October 5, 1913, Verny became home to a teacher's seminary with a preparatory grade and a first grade in it (Obzor..., 1915: 105).

By 1905, the region had seven lower educational institutions (urban schools) – one four-grade urban school in Przhhevsk and six three-grade schools (the ones in Verny, the stanitsa of Bolshe-Almatinskaya, Pishpek, Kopal, Dzsharkent, and Lepsinsk). Each of the schools offered instruction in hand-work. In 1904, the schools had a combined enrollment of 1,175 boys, with these distributed by social estate as follows: urban dwellers – 57 %, Cossacks – 19 %, nobles – 9 %, peasants – 7 %, indigenes – 4 %, and the rest – members of other groups (Pamyatnaya knizhka..., 1905: 253).

In 1910, the stanitsa of Sofiyskaya, Verny Uyezd, became home to a four-grade urban school (Obzor..., 1911: 107). In 1911, urban schools began to be transformed into higher primary schools in the region. In 1913, the region had nine such schools, with a combined enrollment of 1,075 boys and 60 girls. The social-estate composition of the student body was as follows: 439 – children of

urban dwellers, 347 – children of peasants, 196 – children of Cossacks, 113 – children of nobles and functionaries, and the rest – members of other groups (Obzor..., 1915: 107).

By 1905, the region had 49 one- and two-grade parish schools, with two of these being two-grade female schools, 38 – one-grade male schools, six – one-grade female schools, and three – public schools. The schools had a combined enrollment of 3,112 students (2,245 boys and 867 girls). The social-estate composition of the student body was as follows: 41 % – children of peasants, 28 % – children of Cossacks, 25 % – children of urban dwellers, 3 % – children of nobles and functionaries, and the rest – members of other groups (Pamyatnaya knizhka..., 1905: 253-254). In 1910, the region became home to another nine parish schools, with the combined enrollment in this sector reaching 6,388 students (4,759 boys and 1,629 girls) (Obzor..., 1911: 108).

In the late 19th century, the region became home to Russo-indigenous schools as well (Abdrakhim, 2023: 129). In 1905, Semirechenskaya Oblast had 12 Russo-indigenous schools, of which only one educational institution, the one in Tokmak, had a student body of a decent size – 55 students (52 Muslims and four Orthodox Christians), with the remaining 11 schools having a combined enrollment of just 177. The schools situated close to ethnic-Russian populated localities had enrollments of at least 30 students, whilst those situated far from them did not even enroll 10 students in 1905 (Pamyatnaya knizhka..., 1905: 254-256). In 1910, no new Russo-indigenous schools were opened, with the total figure being 23 schools (Abdrakhim, 2023: 131), with a combined enrollment of 789 boys (Obzor..., 1911: 109). In 1913, the region became home to six new Russo-indigenous schools (three male and three female). The previously opened schools had a combined enrollment of 1,190 students (1,084 boys and 106 girls) (Obzor..., 1915: 108). With there being a shortage of qualified teachers in the region, it was expected that the region's network of primary schools would develop more briskly via recruiting fresh graduates from the teacher's seminary.

Educational institutions under the purview of the Ecclesiastical Department

The opening of educational institutions under the purview of the Ecclesiastical Department in Semirechenskaya Oblast began as soon as *The Rules on Parochial Schools* was signed into law on June 13, 1884.

In 1905, the region had 44 parochial schools, with three of these being two-grade, 28 – one-grade, and 13 – literacy schools. As at 1903, the schools had a combined enrollment of 1,980 students (1,044 boys and 936 girls) (Pamyatnaya knizhka..., 1905: 259-260).

In 1913, the region became home to another six parochial schools, with the total figure reaching 72 (three two-grade schools, with the rest being one-grade schools). The schools had a combined enrollment of 4,243 students (2,189 boys and 2,054 girls) (Obzor..., 1915: 108).

Educational institutions under the purview of the Ministry of Arable Farming and State Properties

In 1871, the region became home to Verny School of Horticulture. Initially, the facility had the following aims: 1) train professional horticulturists; 2) promote effective horticulture practices, including by way of distribution of free fruit-tree and shrub seedlings to residents. However, over time the school's focus shifted to training professional horticulturists exclusively. In addition, in 1894 the region became home to four agricultural schools (the ones in Pishpek, Kopal, Dzharkent, and Przhevalsk). These schools had an average enrollment of 25 students and offered instruction in horticulture, gardening, apiculture, livestock farming, and some other disciplines (Pamyatnaya knizhka..., 1905: 262-263).

In addition to the above-mentioned educational institutions, by 1913 the region had become home to a forestry school. Focused on training rangers, it was opened on October 1, 1909 (Obzor..., 1915: 109; Obzor..., 1911: 110).

Despite all the effort put by the Russian administration into spreading secular education among the region's Kirghiz residents, it was unable to achieve this objective in the imperial period. In 1915, Semirechenskaya Oblast had 113,349 school-age children (ages 8 to 11), of whom only 12,239 (10.8 %) were going to school (RGIA. F. 733. Op. 207. D. 39. L. 1). Consequently, in the early 20th century the local administration modified its objectives – the focus was now on spreading primary education among the region's ethnic-Russian population. Eventually, much success was achieved in this area.

Table 1 displays the numbers of educational institutions and students in the territory of the Semirechenskoye Cossack Host in 1891–1914.

Table 1. Numbers of Educational Institutions and Students in the Territory of the Semirechenskoye Cossack Host (1891–1914) (RGIA. F. 733. Op. 207. D. 30. L. 1)

Year	Population	Number of educational institutions	Number of students	Number of residents per student
1891	29,612	18	865	35
1901	36,688	19	1,413	26
1910	53,646	47	2,801	20
1914	55,716	46	3,008	18

As evidenced in Table 1, in the period 1891–1914 the Cossack population in the area increased 90 %, whereas the numbers of schools and students there increased 300 % and 340 %, respectively. Furthermore, the figure for the number of students against the number of Cossack residents there in 1914 (18 residents per student) was close to the average among the country's Cossack hosts (17 residents per student) (RGIA. F. 733. Op. 207. D. 30. L. 1). These data clearly indicate that in that period the system of public education in the region developed at a rate that outstripped the population increase and that the aim of having the overwhelming majority of children in the ethnic-Russian population of Semirechenskaya Oblast attend primary school was likely to be achieved in the near future.

5. Conclusion

During the imperial period, the development of the system of public education in Semirechenskaya Oblast was governed by a regional factor – the majority of the region's population being Muslim. It was difficult to overcome the reluctance of members of the region's Muslim community to have their children attend secular schools, so the Russian local administration set itself the objective of having as many children in the region's ethnic-Russian community as possible attend school. In the period from 1867 to 1917, Semirechenskaya Oblast saw the creation of an entire network of secondary and lower educational institutions, which included male and female gymnasiums and progymnasiums, higher primary schools, parochial schools, primary schools under the purview of the Ministry of Public Education, and lower vocational schools (those of horticulture, forestry, and gardening). There also was a teacher's seminary, which helped address the need for qualified teachers in the region.

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