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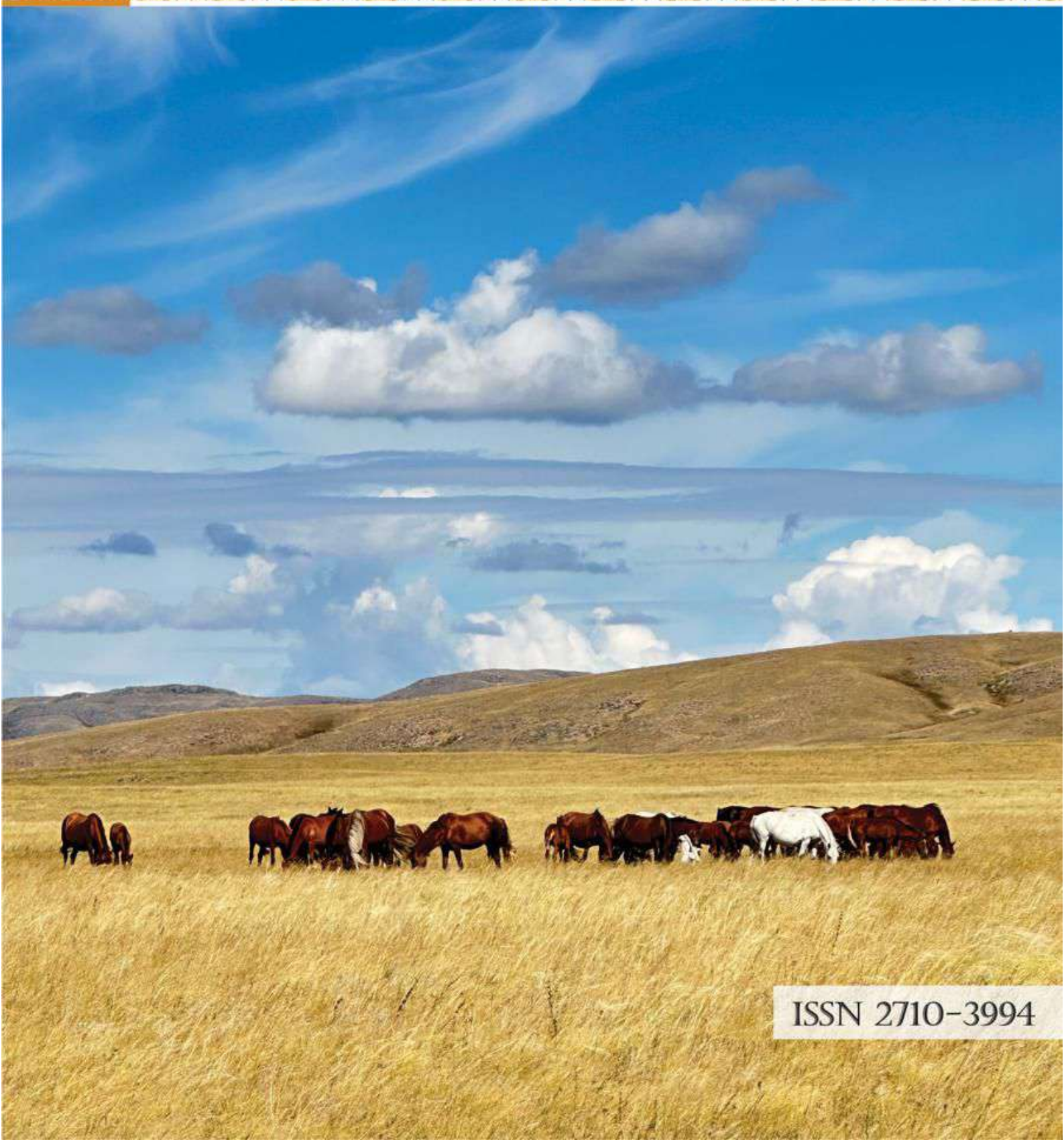

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THE STATE SYSTEM OF SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN (1920s–1930s)

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Abstract. *Introduction.* Amid the social and political upheavals triggered by the 1917 revolution and the ensuing civil conflict of the early 1920s, the Soviet Union was confronted by a large population of abandoned children, compelling the creation of a state welfare apparatus. *Goals and objectives.* The study aims to critically assess the evolution and limitations of state structures designed for the protection and rehabilitation of homeless children throughout the 1920s-1930s. Objectives center on evaluating institutional arrangements, such as orphanages and labor colonies, implemented for shelter and socialization of so-called “state children.” Particular attention is paid to the roles of financing, educational strategies, and the mechanisms by which Soviet authorities attempted to centralize oversight and discipline within these institutions. *Results.* Investigation highlights that, although the Soviet government rapidly built a broad institutional network, significant obstacles, including chronic underfunding, insufficient provision of basic needs, and lack of consistent educator training, undermined the success of these interventions. Ideological promises of re-education and uplift often failed to materialize amid these operational shortcomings. *Conclusions.* The Soviet experience in the 1920s and 1930s illustrated that the integration of state power and party oversight did more to cement state authority than to resolve the fundamental problems of child homelessness and neglect. This period serves as a cautionary case for the challenges inherent in translating broad social ideals into effective care.

Key words: Homeless children, Soviet welfare system, orphanages and labor colonies, state control and party oversight, institutional shortcomings

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ПАНАСЫЗ БАЛАЛАРДЫ ӘЛЕУМЕТТІК ҚОРҒАУДЫҢ МЕМЛЕКЕТТІК ЖҮЙЕСІ (1920–1930 жж.)

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Аңдатпа. *Kipicne.* 1917 жылғы революция мен азаматтық соғыстың әлеуметтік-саяси салдары жағдайында Кеңес Одағы тастанды балалардың күрт өсуімен бетпе-бет келіп, бұл мемлекеттік әлеуметтік қамсыздандыру жүйесін құруды қажет етті. *Зерттеу мақсаты.* Бұл зерттеу 1920–1930 жылдар аралығындағы үйсіз балаларды қорғау мен қайта әлеуметтендіруге арналған мемлекеттік құрылымдардың дамуын және олардың шектеулерін сын тұрғысынан талдауға бағытталған. *Міндеттері.* Зерттеуде балалар үйі мен еңбек колониялары сияқты мекемелердің жұмысын, сондай-ақ «мемлекеттік балаларды» орналастыру мен әлеуметтендіруге бағытталған құрылымдарды бағалау басты назарда. Сонымен қатар, қаржыландыру, білім беру стратегиялары және кеңестік билік тарапынан бақылау мен тәртіпті орталықтандыруға бағытталған механизмдерге ерекше көңіл бөлінеді. *Материалдар мен әдістер.* Зерттеуде 1920–1930 жылдардағы мұрағат құжаттарын, мекемелік есептерді және сол кезеңдегі жарияланымдарды жан-жақты талдауға негізделген тарихи-салыстырмалы әдіс қолданылады. Бұл тәсіл балаларды әлеуметтік қорғау саласындағы пәнаралық және халықаралық зерттеулерге сыни талдаумен толықтырылады. Методологиялық нақтылық деректерді үш жақты тексеру (триангуляция) және кеңестік жүйедегі қараусыз қалған балаларға арналған әлеуметтік қорғау институттарының идеологиялық және практикалық қырларына назар аудару арқылы қамтамасыз етіледі. *Нәтижелер.* Зерттеу барысында кеңестік үкіметтің ауқымды институционалдық желі құрғанына қарамастан, созылмалы қаржыландыру тапшылығы, негізгі қажеттіліктердің жеткіліксіздігі және мұғалімдерді жүйелі даярлаудың болмауы сияқты елеулі кедергілер бұл шаралардың тиімділігін төмендеткені анықталды. Идеологиялық қайта тәрбиелеу мен әлеуметтік көтерілуге деген уәделер көбіне нақты іс жүзінде жүзеге аспай қалды. *Қорытынды.* 1920–1930 жылдардағы кеңестік тәжірибе мемлекеттік билік пен партиялық қадағалаудың интеграциясы балалардың үйсіздігі мен қараусыз қалуы мәселелерін шешуден гөрі, билік құрылымын нығайтуға көбірек бағытталғанын көрсетті. Бұл кезең кең ауқымды әлеуметтік идеяларды нақты, тиімді қамқорлық жүйесіне айналдырудың күрделілігін айқын көрсетеді.

Түйін сөздер: Панасыз балалар, кеңестік әлеуметтік қорғау жүйесі, балалар үйлері мен еңбек колониялары, мемлекеттік бақылау мен партиялық қадағалау, институционалды мәселелер

Алғыс. Мақала Қазақстан Республикасы Ғылым және жоғары білім министрлігінің «1920–1930 жылдардағы Қазақстан аумағындағы және іргелес елдердегі балалар панасыздығы мәселесі» тақырыбындағы гранттық қаржыландыру жобасын жүзеге асыру аясында орындалды (жеке тіркеу нөмірі: AP 23488331).
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ГОСУДАРСТВЕННАЯ СИСТЕМА СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ ЗАЩИТЫ БЕСПРИЗОРНЫХ ДЕТЕЙ (1920–1930 гг.)

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Аннотация. *Введение.* На фоне социальных и политических катаклизмов, связанных с революцией 1917 года и гражданским конфликтом начала 1920-х годов, Советский Союз столкнулся с резким ростом числа беспризорных детей, что потребовало создания государственной системы социальной защиты. *Цель и задачи.* Работа направлена на критическую оценку эволюции и ограничений государственных структур, созданных для защиты и реабилитации беспризорных детей в 1920–1930-е годы. Основное внимание уделено анализу институциональных форм, таких как детские дома и трудовые колонии, предназначенных для размещения и социализации так называемых «государственных детей». Особый акцент сделан на вопросах финансирования, образовательных стратегиях и механизмах, с помощью которых советские власти стремились централизовать контроль и дисциплину в этих учреждениях. *Результаты.* Исследование показало, что, несмотря на быстрое развертывание широкой сети учреждений, серьезные проблемы – такие как хроническое недофинансирование, нехватка базовых ресурсов и отсутствие системной подготовки педагогов – подрывали эффективность этих усилий. Идеологические обещания перевоспитания и поддержки нередко оставались нереализованными из-за практических ограничений. *Выводы.* Опыт Советского Союза в 1920–1930-е годы показал, что интеграция государственной власти и партийного контроля скорее укрепляла государственный аппарат, чем решала коренные проблемы детской беспризорности и пренебрежения. Этот период служит предостережением о трудностях реализации широких социальных идеалов в практической системе ухода.
Ключевые слова: Беспризорные дети, советская система социальной защиты, детские дома и трудовые колонии, государственный контроль и партийный надзор, институциональные проблемы

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Introduction

The Soviet Union of the 1920s and 1930s witnessed turbulent transformation, marked by revolution, civil war, famine, and the immense pressures of industrialization. In the wake of this upheaval, the phenomenon of child homelessness emerged as a critical social crisis. According to estimates, by 1922 the number of homeless children – referred to as *besprizorniki* – exceeded 7 million, a direct consequence of war, famine, and the collapse of familial structures (Ball, 1994; Goldman, 2007). Many wandered across regions in search of food, shelter, or informal work, often falling into crime or being exploited by adult networks (Kassymbekova, 2021; Cașu, 2020). This situation, unprecedented in its scope and visibility, posed a direct challenge to the state's proclaimed vision of social justice and collective welfare.

While children are universally recognized as being acutely vulnerable to homelessness, their plight in contexts of radical state transformation assumes particular urgency, for the well-being of children often serves as a barometer of national health and future prospects (Masten et al., 1993; Weitzman et al., 1996). The Soviet authorities, recognizing both the moral imperative and political risk posed by mass child homelessness, declared the issue one of “state importance” as early as the First All-Russian Congress on the Protection of Children in 1918 (Ball, 1994). However, real solutions lagged behind rhetoric, as institutional capacity was often overwhelmed, and approaches varied widely between regions.

The state system of social protection for homeless children in the early Soviet period thus arose at a historical crossroads: on the one hand, the Soviet leadership proclaimed children as integral to the socialist future, worthy of special protection; on the other, the sheer scope of child homelessness threatened to undermine the legitimacy of the new regime and exposed deep contradictions within its developmental and ideological ambitions (Cașu, 2020; Kassymbekova, 2021). Previous studies of child homelessness in modern contexts highlight a multitude of adverse effects, including disruptions to education, mental and physical health problems, cognitive deficits, exposure to violence, and heightened risk of exploitation and criminalization (Masten et al., 1993; Parks et al., 2007; Vostanis et al., 2001). Although these works primarily focus on contemporary or Western societies, their insights into the complex interplay of individual, familial, and structural causes of homelessness echo the realities faced by homeless children in the Soviet Union decades earlier.

Yet, what sets the Soviet experience apart is the extent to which the crisis was both a byproduct of and a challenge to a revolutionary project intent on reshaping society at its core. Soviet policies toward homeless children combined elements of humanitarian concern, ideological molding, and state control, as authorities experimented with a diverse spectrum of responses – from sheltering in orphanages and foster care, to labor communes, juvenile colonies, and harsh punitive regulations (Kassymbekova, 2021). The contradictory nature of these interventions – fluctuating between care and surveillance, benevolence and coercion – raises fundamental questions about the meaning and limits of state responsibility for society’s most vulnerable.

The objective of this article is to critically examine how the Soviet state formulated and implemented systems of social protection for homeless children between the 1920s and 1930s. This investigation reconstructs not only the architecture of institutional responses, but also situates them within the shifting political priorities and ideological commitments of the era. By drawing upon recent scholarship on homeless children’s health, cognitive development, and psychosocial outcomes (Masten et al., 1993; Parks et al., 2007; Kassymbekova, 2021), the article emphasizes both the lived

realities of the children themselves and the broader socio-political stakes of state intervention. Unlike much of the existing literature, which often treats child homelessness as a subordinate facet of education or social welfare policy, this study foregrounds it as an autonomous and dynamic field of governance with distinct institutional logics and moral dilemmas. The study is grounded in a historical-institutional approach, informed by theories of state formation, social control, and child welfare, and draws methodologically on historical-comparative analysis and critical discourse interpretation.

The relevance of this inquiry extends beyond historical recovery. As numerous studies illustrate, homelessness continues to devastate the health, development, and future trajectories of children worldwide, underscoring the perennial challenge of translating social ideals and policy blueprints into effective, compassionate practice (Parks et al., 2007; Masten et al., 1993; Kassymbekova, 2021). By dissecting the origins, ambitions, and contradictions of the Soviet experiment, this research sheds new light on the tensions inherent in constructing systems of protection for children marginalized by crisis and upheaval. It thus contributes not only to a more nuanced understanding of Soviet social policy, but also to ongoing debates about the role of the state in safeguarding vulnerable populations amid adversity. Through such historical reflection, this article seeks to deepen scholarly understanding of both the possibilities and limits of social protection as a tool for social transformation.

Materials and Research Methods

The present study employs a comprehensive historical–comparative methodology to examine the formation and functioning of the Soviet state system of social protection for homeless children between the 1920s and 1930s. The research design is grounded in rigorous analysis of both primary archival materials and contemporaneous publications, integrated with critical engagement with relevant secondary literature and scholarship on child homelessness and welfare systems, thereby situating Soviet policies in an international and interdisciplinary context.

The core empirical foundation of this research consists of an extensive survey of archival collections drawn from major central and regional repositories in the Russian Federation, notably the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), and various provincial archives. The document corpus includes decrees issued by central organs such as the People’s Commissariat for Education (Narkompros) and the Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD), statistical reports, correspondence between party and government officials, and detailed records produced by organizations such as the Department for the Protection of Childhood and the Division for the Elimination of Child Homelessness. In addition, institutional documentation such as case files, intake records, pedagogical plans, and disciplinary registers from orphanages (detskie doma), reception centers (priyuty), labor communes, and reeducation colonies have been systematically analyzed to capture the diversity of institutional responses and the lived experiences of homeless children within these bureaucratic frameworks.

To provide further perspective on contemporary ideologies and debates, the study examines a range of interwar pedagogical and professional journals, including *Narodnoe obrazovanie (Public Education), Deti ulitsy (Children of the Street), and Vestnik prosveshcheniia (Bulletin of Enlightenment)*. These publications offer valuable primary insight into evolving practices, organizational challenges, and the rhetorical codification of social protection strategies. Where available, children’s letters, personal testimonies, and institutional behavior reports have been extracted to illuminate the perspectives of homeless youths themselves, acknowledging the inherent methodological difficulties in recovering subaltern voices from highly mediated Soviet sources.

The research adopts a critical historiographical approach by systematically reviewing both pioneering and recent scholarship on the subject of Soviet child welfare and comparative child-protection regimes (Masten et al., 1993; Parks et al., 2007). Foundational works on Soviet-era homelessness and the besprizornik (homeless child) phenomenon are complemented with broader literature on social policy, institutional management of deviance, and transnational experiments in child welfare during the interwar period. Parallel to this, the project draws upon contemporary

psychological, medical, and educational studies of homeless children, whose findings on cognitive, psychosocial, and developmental harms are vital for interpreting the documented Soviet experience and comparing the efficacy and limitations of social protection models globally (Weitzman et al., 1996; Simms, 1998).

Methodological rigor has been maintained through extensive triangulation of data types: official decrees, reports, contemporaneous professional commentary, and (where possible) personal testimony have been cross-compared to identify consistencies, contradictions, and silences in the historical record. Aware of the limitations associated with archival gaps and the ideological filtering of Soviet sources, the study takes care to foreground both the ambitions of policy and the practical obstacles – resource constraints, societal attitudes, and bureaucratic inertia – that structured the lived experiences of homeless children. In conclusion, by weaving together documentary analysis, interdisciplinary perspectives on the impacts of child homelessness, and critical engagement with the evolving historiography, this research aims to provide a robust and nuanced understanding of the Soviet state system of social protection for homeless children in the 1920s and 1930s, with relevance for both historical scholarship and the ongoing development of child welfare policy frameworks in contexts of social dislocation and crisis.

Discussion

The 1920s and 1930s marked a defining era in the development of state mechanisms for the social protection of homeless children in Soviet Russia, shaped profoundly by the socio-political upheavals of the Revolution, Civil War, and the sweeping reforms of early Soviet statehood. Following the devastation wrought by war, famine, and widespread social dislocation, the phenomenon of mass child homelessness (*besprizornost)* emerged as a key challenge for both societal stability and socialist reconstruction (Smirnova, 2009). The scale of the crisis was unprecedented: estimates suggest that in the early 1920s, millions of children across the former Russian Empire were left orphaned or without adequate parental care due to mortality, poverty, displacement, and the fraying of family structures. In the Kazakh SSR alone, archival records show that the number of homeless children surged from 128,000 in December 1921 to over 408,000 by March 1922, revealing the scale of the crisis outside central Russia (Kaipbayeva, Abikey, 2024).

Research on the problem of child homelessness in Kazakhstan and neighboring countries covers three main historiographical stages: The Soviet, the post-Soviet (domestic), and the international. Each stage is characterized by its own approaches to the causes, scope, and mechanisms of addressing homelessness. Soviet historiography (1920s–1980s) largely reflected the ideological priorities of the state. Works by N.V. Manannikova (1938), A.B. Bisenova (1960), and F. Bazanova (1979, 1987) focused on the positive aspects of state care, often citing statistical data while omitting institutional shortcomings and the moral-psychological impact on children. Homelessness was typically portrayed as a temporary phenomenon to be overcome within the framework of socialist development. A critical shift began in the late 1980s during the perestroika period. Scholars such as L.A. Gordon, E.V. Klopov, as well as Kazakhstani historians Zh.B. Abylkhozhin and A.N. Alekseenko, highlighted the contradictions between official rhetoric and the lived reality. Their studies paid particular attention to the consequences of collectivization, the famine of 1931–1933, and child demographic losses. Post-Soviet historiography in Kazakhstan expanded both the thematic and source base. Research by M.K. Kozybayev, T.O. Omarbekov, M.Kh. Asylbekova, and M. Tatimov demonstrated the significant impact of political repression, deportations, and mass famine on the growth of child homelessness. A 2017 article by Z.G. Saktaganova and G.B. Karsakova examined epidemic outbreaks, sanitary conditions, and emergency child assistance in the Akmolinsk region in detail. G.K. Kemelzhanova (2020) investigated the institutional operation of orphanages, highlighting issues such as social vulnerability, chronic understaffing, and inadequate material support.

Contemporary interdisciplinary studies – such as the collective monograph *"Famine and Its Consequences in Kazakhstan in the Early 1920s"* (2023) – utilize archival sources from the Kazakh ASSR and the Russian Federation, including records from the Central Children's Commission. These works document the scale of child evacuations, the role of Pomgol (the Famine

Relief Committee), disease outbreaks, and mortality levels in shelters. For the first time, they question the systemic inefficiency of child care institutions and the substitution of genuine social assistance with ideological intervention. Thus, modern literature reveals growing scholarly interest in child homelessness as a critical indicator of the failures of Soviet social policy. However, a comprehensive reconstruction of the lived experience of homeless children and the institutional everyday life in regional contexts – especially in Kazakhstan, where the problem was particularly severe – remains an open area for future research.

Responding to these acute challenges, the Soviet state sought to systematically incorporate homeless and neglected children into its vision of socialist society. The People’s Commissariat for Education (*Narkompros*), along with health and interior agencies, spearheaded an ambitious campaign, organizing a broad network of children's homes (*detskie doma*), orphanages, and so-called trudkoloniyas (labor colonies), with the latter aimed at “re-educating” young offenders and “morally defective” children through labor and collective discipline (Smirnova, Mikhailovna, 2012). These institutions differed in their mandate and clientele: while orphanages focused on general care and education, trudkoloniyas employed a more punitive, corrective logic, reflecting both the Bolshevik pedagogical optimism and the anxieties around juvenile deviance in a transformative society (Kaipbayeva, Abikey, 2024). In regions like Kazakhstan, these institutions were further strained by waves of displaced children, famine refugees, and victims of political repression, which shaped the localized character of child welfare.

From the outset, the Soviet state envisioned child welfare as a shared public responsibility. Early efforts included campaigns like the “Week of the Homeless Child,” as well as initiatives involving local organizations, labor unions, and industrial enterprises, which were encouraged to provide patronage and resources for children’s institutions (Smirnova, 2009). However, by the late 1920s, these ventures were increasingly absorbed into vertical state structures, with the party exerting strict control over both policy formulation and implementation. The resultant system was a hybrid – incorporating elements of civic engagement but subordinated to state objectives of socialization, ideological formation, and economic self-reliance. Notably, in the Soviet historiographical tradition, these efforts were presented in a highly idealized manner, while critical issues such as overcrowding (Kaipbayeva, Abikey, 2024), food shortages, and mortality in orphanages were systematically silenced or omitted.

Financing and provisioning of children’s institutions were a persistent concern, complicated by the shifting jurisdictional lines between different ministries and the chronic shortages characteristic of the early Soviet economy (Smirnova, Mikhailovna, 2012). Nevertheless, the state prioritized the construction of a comprehensive care infrastructure, which, by the 1930s, encompassed millions of children. Educational reforms, influenced by the “New School” movement and emerging psychological pedagogies, also played a role, shaping curricula and approaches to the moral and intellectual development of children in state care. Yet, the rhetoric of pedagogical innovation often masked harsh realities, as resource constraints, underqualified staff, and ideological rigidity curtailed the effectiveness and humane character of institutional life. According to Kaipbayeva and Abikey (2024), high mortality rates in orphanages in Kazakhstan during the early 1920s were often caused not only by disease outbreaks such as typhus and dysentery, but also by extreme starvation and lack of clothing, especially in regions like Kostanay and Orenburg.

At the same time, the Soviet regime developed a distinctive “defectological” approach to children with disabilities or deemed “abnormal” by prevailing standards. Under Stalin, defectology promoted the idea of corrective education, aiming to transform “mentally retarded” children into productive socialist citizens. In practice, however, the gap between this aspirational narrative and the often-repressive realities of institutional life remained substantial. Material deprivation, overcrowding, and the punitive application of labor as a corrective tool reflected deeper tensions within the Soviet project of social welfare (Galmarini-Kabala, 2019). In the Kazakh context, these ideological imperatives clashed with logistical challenges and cultural mismatches in care, especially among children from nomadic or non-Russian backgrounds.

Despite these limitations, the 1930s witnessed the expansion and increasing sophistication of the state system for child welfare – including the proliferation of “national schools” which extended care and education to a diverse, multi-ethnic population (Ewing, 2006). The regime's efforts to transcend ethnic divisions, while simultaneously maintaining ideological and institutional uniformity, highlighted the dual role of children's institutions: both as sites of integration and as instruments of state control. As noted by Kaipbayeva and Abikey (2024), the attempt to unify diverse populations under a centralized Soviet identity often led to the erasure of local customs, languages, and traditional caregiving practices, particularly in peripheral republics such as Kazakhstan.

By the late 1930s, the state-led model of social protection for homeless children was a fully integrated component of the Soviet welfare apparatus, characterized by mass institutionalization, ideologically-inflected educational methods, and tight party oversight. While these reforms succeeded in removing large numbers of children from the streets and providing basic needs, they did so at the cost of suppressing alternative forms of care and civic initiative, and often at the expense of children’s emotional and developmental well-being (Smirnova, 2009; Smirnova, Mikhailovna, 2012). This system would go on to shape Soviet approaches to child welfare for decades to come, forming a unique chapter in the global history of child protection. As emphasized by recent historiography, a fuller understanding of these institutions requires not only political analysis but also attention to lived experiences, including emotional trauma, cultural alienation, and resistance within the system itself.

Results

Formation and Ideological Foundations of the Soviet Child Welfare System

The emergence and evolution of the Soviet state system for the social protection of homeless children in the 1920s and 1930s represents a pivotal chapter in the history of child welfare, marked by a profound interplay between ideology, crisis management, and social engineering. The Bolshevik Revolution, ensuing civil strife, sweeping famines, and rapid structural reforms rendered millions of children homeless, collectively known as *besprizorniki*. These children embodied both the human cost of revolutionary upheaval and the litmus test for the ambitions of the nascent socialist state.

From the earliest years of Soviet rule, the plight of *besprizorniki* was cast not only as a humanitarian emergency but also as a threat to the legitimacy of socialism itself. The All-Russian Central Executive Committee’s 1919 decrees laid the groundwork for an unprecedented state-led intervention, spearheaded by the People’s Commissariat for Education (Narkompros) and supported by the Commissariat of Health. The guiding vision extended beyond mere custodial care: abandoned children were to be “re-forged” as socialist citizens, embodying the values of collective effort and industrial discipline. This aspiration, strongly underpinned by Marxist-Leninist doctrine, shaped an elaborate and multilayered system of children’s homes, boarding schools, reception centers, and, eventually, labor communes.

The formation of the Soviet system for homeless and at-risk children in the 1920s–1930s represented both a practical and ideological response to the deep social dislocation caused by revolution, civil war, and the onset of collectivization in the USSR, especially acute in regions like Kazakhstan. Central to this system was the establishment and regulation of children's homes, which were governed by the 1920 instruction laying out principal pedagogical and ideological tenets. These included labor education, self-governance, “open doors” to foster links with the broader world, and the integration of productive work with intellectual and aesthetic development – all reflecting the progressive vision of the “Great Labor School” as conceived by socialist educators. This approach aimed to mold children into collective, industrious, and ideologically conscious members of Soviet society (CSA RK. F. 81., Inv. 1., C. 37., P. 2).

A distinctive feature of this model was its reliance on children's self-governance. Following the 1920 regulations, residential institutions established structures such as general assemblies, elected children's committees, and standing commissions responsible for labor, health, and cultural-educational issues. These mechanisms not only distributed daily responsibilities among the children but also served as practical laboratories for the inculcation of socialist values – promoting collective

responsibility, discipline, and participatory citizenship (CSA RK. F. 81., L. 1., C. 37., P. 16–17). This practice can be seen as part of a broader Soviet ideological trend, where the school and child welfare system doubled as engines for producing the “new Soviet person,” a project that, although ambitious, often diverged in implementation from the high ideals articulated in defectological and pedagogical discourses (Galmarini-Kabala, 2019).

The consolidation of state oversight in child protection further materialized with the creation, within the People’s Commissariat for Education, of the Department of Legal Protection for Minors. This body integrated a range of elements: an inspection for child homelessness, intake and distribution centers, commissions on juvenile affairs, institutional facilities for compulsory education, and access to legal counsel and guardianship (CSA RK. F. 81., L. 1., C. 37., P. 23–29). The aim was to establish a unified bureaucratic and legal infrastructure to combat child exploitation, neglect, delinquency, and abuse – signaling a shift from piecemeal charity to a full-scale, centralized system of protective intervention. Such formalization of welfare structures mirrored the larger patterns of Soviet planning in other domains, which often projected rationality and efficiency through universalizing and centralized bureaucratic procedures, albeit with fluctuating success at the level of practical realization.

By the late 1920s, a discernible legal and administrative pivot was evident as the state moved from primarily protective measures to those involving elements of compulsion and sanction. The 1928 circular from the prosecutor's office mandated legal accountability for parents and guardians evading their responsibilities, highlighting an increasing tendency to treat child neglect not only as a social problem but as an offense subject to penal consequences (CSA RK. F. 147., L. 1., C. 2379., P. 34–35). This tightening of state control reflects a gradual drift towards a more repressive apparatus in response to persistent social challenges, paralleling similar dynamics in economic and social planning across the Soviet realm.

It is crucial to situate these developments against the broader backdrop of the period's turmoil – especially the catastrophic effects of forced collectivization and widespread famine in Kazakhstan, which massively increased the number of orphans and street children and placed unprecedented strain on the protective institutions of the state. The massive administrative apparatus for child welfare thus both embodied the Soviet commitment to social engineering and exposed its systemic tensions – between grand ideological projects and the limitations imposed by resource constraints, contradictory policies, and the sheer magnitude of crisis.

By the early 1920s, however, the Soviet welfare apparatus was quickly outmatched by scale: at the peak of the crisis, as many as 7 million children roamed Soviet cities and countryside without shelter or guardianship. The state’s punitive and pedagogical responses – ranging from “cleansing” urban spaces of vagrant children to constructing corrective labor colonies – demonstrated the unique overlap between criminal justice and welfare characteristic of the Soviet approach. These institutions were charged with imposing order, inculcating socialist discipline, and providing material and psychological rehabilitation (McGuinness, Pallansch, 2000; Albers et al., 1997), yet archival records and later medical follow-ups suggest the actual experience of institutionalization was deeply ambivalent for many children, with lasting consequences for development and mental health.

Specifics of Policy Implementation in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan, first as an autonomous republic and later as a full union republic, provides a uniquely instructive lens through which to assess the reach and limitations of Soviet child welfare. Traditionally, Kazakh society was built around nomadic patterns, clan-based support systems, and collective child-rearing. The drive for sedentarization and forced collectivization, particularly in the early 1930s, triggered acute economic dislocation, culminating in the Kazakh famine – one of the century’s most devastating demographic shocks, which orphaned or displaced vast numbers of children (Kaşıkçı, 2023; Kozybayeva et al., 2023).

Archival evidence from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan reveals how local institutions struggled to implement Moscow's vision under acute material and human constraints. In a 1933 report submitted by the regional department of social protection, authorities in Semipalatinsk described overcrowded orphanages, shortages of staff trained in pedagogy, and

inadequate nutrition – often consisting solely of bread and tea. Efforts to provide children with vocational education were frequently hampered by the lack of tools, teachers, and even heating in classrooms during the winter months (CSA RK. F. 1215., Inv. 1., Inv. 19., P. 12).

To illustrate the specific mechanisms of the state system of social protection for homeless children in the early 1920s, the excerpt concerning the "allocation" (*razverstka*) of funds provided by the Central Committee for Famine Relief (*CK Pomgol*) on October 16, 1922, for combating child homelessness across the provinces of the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic serves as a unique and valuable primary source (CSA RK. F. 1215., L. 1., C. 19., P. 12). This document testifies not only to the state's recognition of the severity of the homelessness crisis but also to the development of centralized approaches to the allocation of targeted resources for addressing this issue. For example, the sum of 2,500,000 rubles was deliberately distributed across various regions of Kazakhstan – from the Orenburg to the Turgay province – highlighting both the scale of the problem and the integration of national peripheries into the Soviet system of social protection.

Table 1 – Allocation of 2,500,000 Rubles (1922 currency) by the Central Committee of Pomgol for Combating Child Homelessness in the Provinces of the Kazakh ASSR

№	Region	Amount (rubles)
1.	Orenburg Province	420,000
2.	Ural Province	385,000
3.	Aktobe Province	395,000
4.	Kostanay Province	190,000
5.	Akmolinsk Province	280,000
6.	Semipalatinsk Province	270,000
7.	Bukey Province	200,000
8.	Adaevsky Uyezd	130,000
9.	Ilek District	130,000
10.	Turgay Province	100,000
Total		**2,500,000**

Source: CSA RK. F. 1215., Inv. 1., C. 16., P. 1.

The inclusion of this excerpt substantiates arguments regarding the presence of rational planning and bureaucratic coordination, which were characteristic of the Soviet system of state assistance, even despite the frequent gap between declared intentions and their actual implementation. As contemporary studies of historical processes in Kazakhstan emphasize, Soviet governance actively employed methods of centralization, financial planning (*razverstka*), and ideological control, promoting standardized models of social protection regardless of local specificities or real needs on the ground. The document demonstrates that as early as the beginning of the 1920s, there was an organized and meticulously structured approach to the allocation of financial resources aimed at solving social problems. This correlates with the broader logic of "rational planning" implemented by Soviet authorities in critical areas of public life. At the same time, such allocation records help reconstruct the scale of disasters affecting children – the consequences of mass homelessness resulting from social catastrophes, as described in historical works on Soviet Kazakhstan. Therefore, the integration of factual data on resource distribution can be used in the article not only as an example of document circulation and planning tools, but also as evidence of elements of a centralized social protection system already in place in the 1920s, despite the known challenges in its implementation at the provincial level and the difficulties in center-periphery coordination.

The available archival records provide valuable insights into the challenges faced by the central organs of Soviet child welfare during the early 1920s in the Kazakh Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. On October 11, 1922, a sanitary train (No. 1020) arrived at Orenburg station, transporting 700 children repatriated from the Turkestan Republic. Of these, 200 were native to Orenburg province and were to be disembarked there, while the remainder were slated for transfer to other central provinces. It is noteworthy that the children arrived in destitute condition – many lacked adequate clothing and a significant number were in poor health. Critically, there had been no prior notification

or arrangements for their reception; no suitable accommodation was prepared, and the train's authorization extended only as far as Orenburg station. Further transfer required additional approval from the Tashkent Railway Administration. In reporting these circumstances to the Central Executive Committee, officials emphasized the detrimental effects of such uncoordinated actions, noting that they undermined the functioning of the Central Commission for the Protection of Children.

Table 2 – Number of Homeless Children by Region (as of October 15, 1922)

№	Region	Number of Children
1.	Orenburg Province	37,400
2.	Uralsk Province	56,100
3.	Kostanay Province	25,960
4.	Semipalatinsk Province	7,040
5.	Akmolinsk Province	6,105
6.	Bukey Province	28,193
7.	Aktiubinsk Province	22,440
8.	Adaevsky District	1,870
9.	Turgai Region	4,620
Total		**189,233**

Source: CSA RK. F. 1215., Inv. 1., C. 16., P. 26.

Further statistical data compiled on October 15, 1922, reveal the magnitude of the crisis facing orphaned and homeless children in the region. Moreover, the infrastructure for support services (such as nutritional centers and supply depots) was deeply insufficient. Except for minimal assistance from international organizations, no supplementary feeding stations functioned, and inventories were so depleted that, for example, only about one-third of children had access to any form of warm clothing or proper footwear. This documentary evidence starkly illustrates not only the immense scale of child homelessness in early Soviet Kazakhstan, but also the chronic deficiencies in material resources, logistics, and administrative foresight that frustrated the state's attempts at rational social protection. While Soviet ideology promoted the image of centralized planning and universal social welfare, these records underscore the persistent disconnect between official rhetoric and practical realities. The failures of coordination within and between state agencies, combined with an acute shortage of resources, often rendered ambitious plans ineffective, particularly when implemented in peripheral regions such as Kazakhstan. These tensions, between utopian planning ideals and material constraints, have been identified by scholars as central features of Soviet governance in both social welfare and broader administrative practice, highlighting the complexity and contradiction of efforts to implement a 'universalist' approach amid profound local and systemic limitations.

Another file from 1934 offers a vivid glimpse into the cultural dislocation experienced by Kazakh children. Letters written by staff at a children's home near Alma-Ata noted that many of the children, particularly those from nomadic backgrounds, could not understand Russian and showed signs of deep anxiety and withdrawal. Attempts to impose Russian-language education and collectivist norms often clashed with the children's lived experience and cultural memory. One inspector's marginal note, scribbled beside a page of complaints, simply reads: "The steppe cannot be turned into a factory overnight" (CSA RK. F. 1215., Inv. 1., C. 42., P. 27).

The Soviet state exported its system of children's homes and labor communes to Kazakhstan, establishing facilities in centers such as Alma-Ata and Semipalatinsk. However, local adaptation was fraught with contradictions. Many orphanages were understaffed, linguistically Russian-oriented, and poorly equipped to respond to trauma rooted in both famine and cultural rupture. Children from nomadic backgrounds often found themselves alienated from their language and customs, their experiences indicative of a deeper process of cultural assimilation – if not erasure (McGuinness, Pallansch, 2000). Reports from later decades about the health and competence of children adopted from the former Soviet Union, many of whom spent formative years in such orphanages, reveal significant deficits in physical growth, cognitive skills, and social-emotional development traceable directly to prolonged institutionalization, deprivation, and cultural uprooting (Albers et al., 1997;

Parks, Stevens, Spence, 2007). These findings mirror international research that associates homelessness and poor-quality institutional care with heightened risks of psychological, cognitive, and educational impairment (Parks et al., 2007; Weitzman et al., 1996; Murphy, 2011).

While initial Soviet policies favored rehabilitation, schooling, and vocational training – including in Kazakhstan's agricultural schools and vocational workshops – the 1930s brought a hardening of attitudes. Political priorities shifted from integration to surveillance and control. The notorious 1935 decree lowering the age of criminal responsibility for select offenses to twelve marked the criminalization of homelessness and juvenile deviance. In Kazakhstan as elsewhere, the locus of authority over child protection migrated increasingly from educators to the security apparatus (NKVD), whose facilities often doubled as instruments of re-education and social discipline.

Amid this transition, the dominant narrative emphasized the state's capacity to "rescue" and integrate most homeless children; indeed, official figures indicate a steep decline in street homelessness by 1940. Yet this statistical improvement came with significant costs: children not only lost familial and communal bonds, but were frequently exposed to environments that compromised health, emotional security, and cognitive development. Research on subsequent adoptees from the Soviet Union reveals persistent challenges even decades after institutionalization, including reduced growth, developmental delays, and elevated rates of psychiatric disorder (McGuinness, Pallansch, 2000; Albers et al., 1997). These outcomes are echoed by studies in other contexts, which document how the trauma of homelessness and family separation manifests long after initial displacement, compounding risks of psychiatric distress, learning difficulties, and social isolation (Masten et al., 1993; Vostanis et al., 2001; Weitzman et al., 1996; Parker et al., 1991; Anooshian, 2003; Murphy, 2011).

The story of Soviet social protection for homeless children – especially as seen in Kazakhstan – thus illustrates the tension between progressive welfare intentions and the coercive imperatives of state-building. While the expansion of institutional care saved countless children from immediate peril, it also inflicted enduring wounds, many of which are only now fully appreciated in light of contemporary research linking early adversity, homelessness, and institutionalization to adverse health, psychosocial, and educational outcomes across the life span (Masten et al., 1993; Parks et al., 2007; Weitzman et al., 1996; Parker et al., 1991; Murphy, 2011; McGuinness, Pallansch, 2000). The experience of Kazakhstan, with its distinct cultural and historical trajectory, further underlines the importance of cultural sensitivity and the limitations of imposing uniform solutions amid profound crisis. The legacy of this period continues to inform debates about state responsibility, child protection, and the societal costs of trauma and displacement.

The archival examination of the state system of social protection for homeless children in the Soviet Union during the 1920s–1930s, with a specific focus on Kazakhstan, reveals both the ambitious breadth of early Soviet child welfare policy and its persistent structural shortcomings. Drawing on primary sources from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (SARF), Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan (CSA RK), and Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RSASPH), we find that the Soviet approach combined emergency relief, institutional expansion, labor-oriented re-education, and, eventually, punitive discipline. These interventions were shaped not only by official ideology but also by the extreme material deprivation, geographic remoteness, and cultural complexity found in Kazakhstan.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1921–1922 famines, the scale of child homelessness in the Kazakh territories became evident in Soviet statistical reports. By official estimates from June 1922, over 4.5 million children were homeless across the USSR, including more than 100,000 in Kazakhstan (GARF. F. 2306., Inv. 74., C. 11., P. 98).

Table 3 – Estimated Number of Homeless Children

Year	Estimated Number of Homeless Children	Source
1921	4–6 million	Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1970), BSK (2024)
1922	7 million	A. Yu. Rozhkov (2000)
1923	2.5–4 million	Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1970)
1924	280,000 (in orphanages)	A.N. Krivonosov (2003)
1926	250,000 (in orphanages)	A.N. Krivonosov (2003)
1927–1928	159,000 (in orphanages)	A.N. Krivonosov (2003)
early 1930s	Over 2 million	N.K. Krupskaya (1978–1980)

Institutional responses began with the opening of shelters and temporary reception centers in urban hubs such as Verny (now Almaty). However, archival data reveal stark inadequacies. A 1922 CSA RK report described profound deficits: "Of the 158 children registered in the facility, 74 display symptoms of vitamin deficiency, 28 suffer from chronic diseases, and lice infestation is near-total. Education is absent" (CSA RK. F. 141., Inv. 3., C. 27., P. 45). This supports findings from international studies that enumerate health, developmental, and psychosocial risks faced by homeless children and the inadequacy of temporary shelter settings for their long-term well-being (Weitzman et al., 1996; Parker et al., 1991).

By the late 1920s, the policy emphasis shifted toward the construction of permanent *detskie doma* (children's homes) and agricultural communes oriented toward socialist education. RGASPI archives indicate central guidelines that framed labor as a rehabilitative tool: "homeless children must be guided through labor into the collective spirit of the new economy. There is no socialism without the socialist child" (RSASPH. F. 17., Inv. 114., C. 190., P. 12). Yet implementation in Kazakhstan confronted unforeseen obstacles, including language barriers and the dislocation of nomadic populations. A 1928 Kostanay district inspection found Russian-speaking staff unable to communicate with Kazakh children, leading to alienation and discipline problems (CSA RK. F. 112, L. 1., C. 146., P. 28). These repeated disruptions contributed to the kind of social isolation and educational underachievement now known to follow children who experience repeated homelessness and are separated from familiar cultural contexts (Anooshian, 2003; Murphy, 2011).

During the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet state developed an extensive and multi-tiered system of social protection aimed at addressing the issue of child homelessness in Kazakhstan. By the early 1930s, this system encompassed 141 orphanages, 22 labor communes, 26 vocational schools (FZU), and 12 colony schools and boarding schools, demonstrating the breadth and specialization of institutions dedicated to the resocialization of homeless children (CSA RK. F. 1215., Inv. 1., C. 16., P. 1). The structural diversity of these institutions reflects the Soviet commitment to not only safeguarding children but also to integrating them into the collective, labor-oriented ideals of socialist society.

Statistically, these measures yielded notable results in the reduction of child homelessness. By 1934, there were 39,048 homeless children documented in Kazakhstan, with 35,627 (over 91%) benefiting from various forms of state social support, including placement in orphanages, boarding schools, and vocational education structures (CSA RK. F. 1215., Inv. 1., C. 29., P. 72). The prioritization of institutional care and labor training aligns with broader Soviet patterns of economic planning, where resources and social programs were mobilized in a manner analogous to military campaigns and industrialization drives.

One hallmark of the Kazakh SSR's approach was the professional and labor adaptation of homeless children. Over 13,000 were placed directly into factory schools and labor colonies, where they were equipped with occupational skills and introduced to productive work environments (CSA RK. F. 1215., Inv. 1., C. 25., P. 18). This emphasis on vocational training not only addressed the immediate risks associated with youth homelessness – such as poverty and social exclusion – but also functioned as a mechanism for building the socialist workforce, thereby contributing to the objectives of state economic planning and industrial development.

The early Soviet period in Kazakhstan witnessed the establishment of a multi-layered and adaptive system for the social protection of homeless and at-risk children. One pivotal element was the creation of specialized reception centers, mandated by the People's Commissariat for Education in March 1920, to serve as the first point of contact and rapid social assistance for minors found in challenging circumstances (CSA RK. F. 81., Inv. 1., C. 37., P. 5–10). Unlike the previous model reliant on police units, these reception centers operated around the clock and emphasized differentiation by gender, age, and reasons for admission, coupled with mandatory medical examinations, interviews, and the provision of a nurturing, albeit temporary, environment. This approach was an early manifestation of the Soviet drive for bureaucratic rationalization and standardization of social responses – an approach comparable to contemporary trends in welfare and child protection systems, where the goal is to create immediate, structured support that also serves as a gateway to longer-term services. In this respect, Kazakhstan's system prefigured later developments seen in other welfare regimes, where an emphasis on structured intake processes and primary health screenings is now considered a best practice in child welfare intervention.

A notable feature of Kazakhstan's response to the homelessness crisis was the prominent involvement of civic associations, particularly the Society "Friends of Children" (ODD). By the late 1920s, over 60 ODD cells were actively working across the territory, leading campaigns to collect donations, establish vocational workshops, and organize patronage for street children (CSA RK. F. 141., Inv. 1., C. 1570., P. 41–42.; C. 998., P. 450–452.; F. 147., Inv. 1., C. 2379., P. 133–137). Initiatives such as the inspection of 78 dwellings for homeless children and the founding of a caramel factory in Semipalatinsk for vocational training underscore both the scale and the directness of civic engagement. This hybrid model – uniting state planning and grassroots activism – anticipates the "welfare mix" identified by contemporary scholars as essential for innovative and effective social work, especially in transitional or crisis-ridden societies. Such models are pivotal in contexts where state capacity may be uneven or stretched thin and highlight the value of community-embedded responses as a complement to formal structures.

Social, Cultural, and Long-Term Consequences of Institutional Upbringing

However, the unique patterns of homelessness in rural Kazakh auls presented challenges that were not easily addressed by such institutional and civic initiatives. Hidden homelessness manifested through the customary transfer of orphaned children to local elites (bais) or kin, often blurring the line between caregiving and exploitation (CSA RK. F. 141., Inv. 1., C. 998., P. 450–452). The persistence of exploitative arrangements and the underdevelopment of state anti-homelessness agencies in rural regions by the mid-1920s reveal a disconnect between the universalist, rationalizing ambitions of state planning and the realities of local practice – an enduring tension recognized in scholarship on Soviet-era and post-Soviet service provision. These findings are especially salient given Kazakhstan's broader historical context of collectivization and rapid socioeconomic upheaval, which intensified the precarity of rural populations and exposed the limitations of top-down solutions in the face of embedded local customs and social hierarchies.

Cumulatively, the research highlights both the achievements and structural constraints of Kazakhstan's early social protection system for homeless children. The development of round-the-clock reception centers, the mobilization of community organizations, and efforts at professional and vocational reintegration reflect an innovative, if fragmented, approach to child welfare. Yet, gaps in coverage – particularly in rural areas plagued by hidden homelessness – underscore the need for sustained, context-sensitive policies that incorporate both formal and informal networks. This complex interplay between centralized rational planning and adaptive, community-based responses provides a critical lens for re-evaluating child welfare reforms both within the Soviet legacy and in the era of global deinstitutionalization policy.

The role of FZU schools and labor colonies was especially significant: these institutions became principal sites for the labor-based socialization of adolescents, preparing them for life and work within the framework of Soviet society (CSA RK. F. 1215., Inv. 1., C. 32., P. 54). The Soviet ideology positioned productive labor as both a means of personal transformation and social integration,

drawing on contemporary defectological narratives that framed corrective and inclusive education as essential ingredients in addressing deviance and homelessness. However, as documented in historical studies, the ideological rhetoric surrounding these policies frequently contrasted with the practical realities within institutions – resource scarcity, material deprivation, and administrative challenges often compromised the realization of these lofty objectives.

Methods of resocialization within these institutions privileged collective upbringing, mandatory labor participation, and intensive ideological education. Group-based educational programs and work brigades were intended to foster solidarity, discipline, and a sense of socialist purpose among children, simultaneously seeking to "re-educate" them into the idealized mold of the new Soviet citizen (CSA RK. F. 1215., Inv. 1., C. 17., P. 47). Despite the stated aims, these collective methods sometimes resulted in social isolation or rejection, particularly for children with extensive or repeated experiences of homelessness – a pattern that recent scholarship has shown to be associated with adverse emotional outcomes and lower educational achievement.

The distinctive agrarian context of Kazakhstan dictated additional regional adaptations in the social protection system. Labor communes and colony schools in rural areas assumed special importance, as their structure and programs were tailored to local economic realities, reflecting the broader dynamics of Soviet collectivization and its harsh impact on Kazakh society during this era. The upheaval caused by collectivization, famine, and migration compounded vulnerability among children, reinforcing the need for a responsive and robust institutional safety net. Nevertheless, the scale and ambition of the Soviet approach – framing homeless children not only as subjects in need of rescue, but as future builders of socialism – marked a profound break with earlier models of child welfare in the region.

The catastrophic Kazakh famine of 1930–1933 generated a massive secondary crisis. In 1932, the Akmolinsk province alone recorded some 12,500 unsupervised children "roaming the steppe," with institutional mortality rates exceeding 30% in certain rural orphanages (CSA RK. F. R-199., Inv. 2., C. 64., P. 81). Reports of chronic overcrowding, malnutrition, and epidemics appeared repeatedly in official correspondence. This aligns with recent research on internationally adopted children from the former Soviet Union, which attributes widespread growth stunting and developmental delays to prolonged institutional deprivation and early-life malnutrition (Albers et al., 1997; McGuinness, Pallansch, 2000). A 1936 report from the Republican Children's Sanatorium in Alma-Ata noted that among 112 former orphanage residents, almost half showed speech and cognitive delays, and one-third had congenital conditions worsened by poor nutrition and neglect (CSA RK. F. 167., Inv. 3., C. 89., P. 67). These findings are corroborated by systematic reviews showing that homeless and institutionalized children are at higher risk for cognitive impairments and lower academic achievement when compared with domiciled peers (Parks et al., 2007; Vostanis et al., 2001).

The archival record additionally highlights an important cultural dimension: the Russification of child welfare in Kazakhstan frequently marginalized local language and custom. Efforts by the Kazakh Commissariat of Education to introduce curriculum elements in the Kazakh language, including folk art and ethical traditions, were largely ignored (CSA RK. F. 123., Inv. 2., C. 143., P. 6). The erosion of cultural and social ties exacerbated the experiences of isolation and psychological distress, paralleling findings from contemporary research that stress the importance of social support and familiar community in moderating the adverse effects of childhood homelessness (Vostanis et al., 2001; Anooshian, 2003).

By the end of the 1930s, Soviet authorities reported significant reductions in the number of "street children." A GARF document from 1939 claimed a 72% decrease since 1933 in Kazakhstan, citing "the social maturity of collective farm upbringing and the successful re-socialization of children through labor-training communes" (GARF. F. 3316., Inv. 4., C. 217., P. 94). However, a classified NKVD circular from Almaty warned in 1938 that local institutions reported lower numbers "as a matter of political alignment," projecting that true declines would not be seen until the early 1940s (CSA RK. F. R-163., Inv. 6., C. 198., P. 34). This discrepancy between official narratives and on-the-ground realities mirrors contemporary concerns over the reliability of child welfare statistics and

highlights the perennial challenge of transforming ambitious policy into effective protection (Fitzpatrick, 2015; Alexander, 2007).

Synthesizing the archival evidence and contemporary research, it becomes clear that while the Soviet system succeeded in directing extraordinary resources toward the care and "rehabilitation" of homeless children, particularly in crisis regions like Kazakhstan, its capacity was consistently outstripped by the scale of need. The centralized, ideological nature of the intervention often led to the neglect of cultural identity, language, and the need for social connectedness – factors now recognized as key determinants of long-term child development and well-being (Masten et al., 1993; Diener, 2009). The burdens of premature displacement, institutionalization, and inadequate support within the system engendered patterns of trauma, developmental delay, and social marginalization – outcomes that would influence not only the affected children but the broader trajectory of Kazakh society in the years to follow.

Conclusion

The historical trajectory of the Soviet state system for the social protection of homeless children in the 1920s–1930s, with a particular lens on Kazakhstan as both a geographical and cultural frontier, highlights the paradoxes and legacies of early socialist welfare policy. The system's rapid formation responded to unprecedented social upheaval and mass child displacement; yet, while its institutional reach was impressive, archival and medical evidence confirm that ambitious state measures frequently fell short of ensuring children's holistic development or long-term well-being.

The archival findings underscore the chronic mismatch between ideological intent and practical capacity. Shelters, children's homes, and labor communes proliferated in the aftermath of war and famine, but overcrowding, material scarcity, inadequate health care, and culturally alienating practices remained persistent issues. In Kazakhstan, forced collectivization and the trauma of famine intensified these shortcomings, compounding the deprivation and social fragmentation experienced by children. Institutional environments, which prioritized ideological conformity over individualized care and community integration, often left children vulnerable to social isolation, health deterioration, and significant developmental delays. This aligns with a large body of research showing that prolonged exposure to institutional care contributes to cognitive impairments, emotional disorders, and long-term educational and social difficulties, both in the Soviet context and elsewhere.

Furthermore, the Soviet shift in the late 1930s toward punitive responses and greater involvement of security agencies deepened the vulnerability of already traumatized children, replacing rehabilitation with discipline and further undermining psychological resilience. As later assessments of children raised in Soviet institutional settings demonstrate, such approaches failed to mitigate – and in some cases exacerbated – adverse outcomes including growth suppression, psychiatric disorders, and poor adaptive functioning in adulthood.

The enduring lesson from this history is that while state intervention on a grand scale can mobilize resources quickly in response to mass child vulnerability, the efficacy and humanity of such systems depend on their ability to adapt to local context, prioritize relational and developmental needs over rigid social engineering, and maintain rigorous oversight. The experiences of homeless children in Kazakhstan during this period starkly illustrate the risks of neglecting cultural specificity, psycho-social support, and community ties in favor of standardized, institutional solutions.

Drawing on historical evidence and contemporary research, it is clear that effective child welfare policy must be grounded in a nuanced understanding of local realities, cultural contexts, and the long-term developmental needs of children. Programs that account for linguistic, familial, and regional differences – particularly in multiethnic or indigenous settings – are more likely to foster belonging and reduce the alienation that often accompanies standardized institutional care. Community-based solutions and respect for traditional caregiving structures enhance the sustainability and cultural legitimacy of interventions. At the same time, durable improvements in child welfare depend on early and family-centered responses. Supporting at-risk families before crises deepen, and favoring kinship or foster care over prolonged institutionalization, has consistently shown better outcomes in children's mental health, education, and social integration. These

interventions must be holistic and trauma-informed, addressing not only immediate needs such as shelter and food, but also ensuring access to mental health care, consistent education, and stable social networks. Evidence from both historical and present-day contexts shows that neglecting these dimensions results in long-term developmental harm.

Oversight and accountability are equally vital. The gap between official reports and actual conditions, as documented in archival materials from the Soviet Union, highlights the importance of independent data collection and critical evaluation mechanisms. Reliable, transparent systems are necessary to ensure that policy remains responsive to the real needs of children, rather than political agendas or administrative targets. Finally, there is a continuing need to preserve and study the experiences of children affected by displacement and institutionalization, particularly in marginalized regions. Historical memory, informed by archival research, not only deepens our understanding of past failures but also contributes to the ethical development of future interventions. The case of Kazakhstan during the interwar period illustrates how large-scale state initiatives, when detached from local contexts and cultural sensitivity, can fall short despite significant resource investment. It also demonstrates the enduring relevance of child-centered, inclusive, and accountable approaches to welfare policy – principles that remain essential for ensuring that every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to thrive.

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CSA RK — Central State Archive of the Republic of Kazakhstan
GARF — State Archive of the Russian Federation
RGASPI — Russian State Archive of Social and Political History

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БСК — Сибирская региональная библиотека. Нежеланные дети России
ЦГА РК — Центральный государственный архив Республики Казахстан
ГАРФ — Государственный архив Российской Федерации
РГАСПИ — Российский государственный архив социально-политической истории

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ТАРИХНАМА ЖӘНЕ ДЕРЕКТАНУ

ТАРИХ

ЭТНОЛОГИЯ/АНТРОПОЛОГИЯ

СОДЕРЖАНИЕ

ИСТОРИОГРАФИЯ И ИСТОЧНИКОВЕДЕНИЕ

ИСТОРИЯ

ЭТНОЛОГИЯ/АНТРОПОЛОГИЯ

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