Comrade Muslims!

by Marie Bennigsen Broxup

Those familiar with Central Asia's ancient history and civilization might assume that the Soviet era—a mere 70 years of alien domination—could have left few scars on people who since time immemorial had learned to withstand and to assimilate foreign conquerors. They would be wrong. More zealously than any former invader, the Soviet Russian overlords set out to destroy the foundation and fabric of Central Asian society. For decades, Soviet propagandists proclaimed that the Central Asian republics had become, through communism, "modern" nations, endowed with all the attributes of developed industrialized countries and enjoying a standard of living much superior to that of neighboring Muslim countries such as Turkey and Iran. Today we know that such tales of Soviet achievements were castles of sand hiding the reality of colonial exploitation, corruption, ethnic strife, and poverty.

What ended so badly began with the highest of hopes. In the early days of the Bolshevik struggle, many native leaders in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and other Muslim areas looked favorably upon Lenin's revolution. They saw it not so much as the beginning of a new socialist era but as the end of Russian imperialist domina-

A Soviet propaganda poster from the early 1920s urges Central Asians—"comrade Muslims"—to support the revolutionary cause.

tion. In 1921, one Tatar observer, Hanafi Muzaffar, expressed this early optimism: "As long as Europe can maintain its imperialistic policy [in the East] our situation will remain hopeless. However, in Europe herself new forces are growing which are becoming more threatening every day for imperialism.... [I]t would be a great mistake for us peoples oppressed by Europe to fail to recognize that Marxism is fighting imperialism. As the Communist Party is fighting this same imperialism in Russia and abroad, we must accept Soviet power."

Lenin's "April Thesis," adopted by the Bolsheviks in the spring of 1917, promised the right of secession and political self-determination to all peoples within the old Russian empire. It did much to rally the support of Muslim nationalists and liberals to the Bolshevik cause, or at least to ensure their initial neutrality.

But when the Bolsheviks—mainly Russian soldiers and workers—took power in Tashkent in October 1917, they received, rather to their surprise (and to that of many Muslims), the support of most of the local Russian population, including former civil servants, officers, merchants, and even the resident Orthodox clergy. This unholy alliance was prompted by a common fear of the native Muslim population, which in many parts of Central Asia had long been excluded from any position of power. All 15 members of the Ruling Council of People's Commissars of the Tashkent Soviet were Russians or other Europeans. The chairman of the Council, a former railroad worker named Kolesov, declared in November 1917 that it was "not possible to admit Muslims into the supreme organ of revolutionary power because the attitude of the local population toward us is uncertain and because it does not possess any proletarian organization."

The some 10 million Muslims of Central Asia could hardly have taken this as a very encouraging message. That same month, convinced that they could not cooperate with the Tashkent Soviet and the regime of terror it had inaugurated, Central Asian leaders called a congress in Kokand. Made up of nationalists and liberals representing all the territories of Turkestan, the Kokand "government" was intended to provide the nucleus for a future centralized government of Turkestan. Mustapha Chokay, a Kazakh aristocrat related to the princely dynasty of Khiva, was elected president. Educated at the law faculty of St. Petersburg, an active publicist instrumental in the political awakening of the Muslim population of Central Asia. Chokay was a moderate Panturkist. Regarding relations with Russia, he favored autonomy rather than secession. His main effort was directed at unifying Turkestan.

At the time, the Kokand government—called the Muslim Provisional Government of Autonomous Turkestan—was the only organization able to mount an effective political opposition to the Tashkent communists. Behaving moderately at first and willing to cooperate with Lenin and the Bolsheviks in Petrograd, the Kokand government viewed the Tashkent leaders as renegades. But after a disappointing exchange with Petrograd in early 1918, the Kokand leaders began to wonder whether they could count on any of the Bolsheviks. On January 23, 1918, they informed the Tashkent Soviet that they were forming a parliament in which one-third of the seats would be reserved for non-Muslims.

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The Tashkent Soviet grew alarmed. Fearful of losing Russian control of the region, Kolesov sent a large but ill-disciplined army to Kokand. Meeting little resistance, the army, which included many Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war, razed the city and massacred most of its 50,000 residents. The Kokand government collapsed, and Chokay fled, eventually ending up in Paris. Grigory Safarov, commissioned by Lenin to investigate the situation in Turkestan, described Kokand as "a sea of fire" the day after the attack. He noted, too, that the looting and banditry of the Tashkent troops was "monstrous."

The destruction of Kokand sparked an insurrection known as the Basmachi War, a struggle that quickly engulfed most of Turkestan, from the eastern Lokay region in present-day Tajikistan to the Fergana Valley to the western Turkmen steppes. The basmachi—meaning bandits—constituted an unexpected and deadly threat to the new Soviet leadership, which at the time was ill-prepared to fight a popular rebellion.

Fortunately for the Bolsheviks, the basmachi leaders were a varied lot who never developed a unified strategy or ideology. They included tribal heads such as Junaid Khan in the Turkmen area and Ibragim Beg in the Lokay region, numerous Sufi sheiks, authentic bandits, a few liberals and reformers, and a former high-ranking Ottoman officer named Enver Pasha, who had tricked Lenin into sending him to Turkestan to fight for the Bolshevik cause. The movement had roots in pre-revolutionary struggles against Russian domination, and though the basmachi had no clear ideology, they had several compelling reasons for fighting. These included the desire to defend their traditional ways against the infidel Russians and, in the case of tribal and clannic leaders, to show loyalty to their former rulers, the Khan of Khiva and the Emir of Bukhara. While compelling to some Central Asians, these reasons proved insufficient to gain the long-term support of the whole native population or to sustain a drawn-out war effort when faced with the enthusiasm and conquering spirit of "war communism."

Following Kokand's destruction, the Tashkent Soviet became completely isolated. Civil war raged in Russia, and Turkestan was cut off from Moscow by the White Army of Admiral Alexander V. Kolchak and Cossack units from the Urals. The Tashkent Soviet had at its disposal some 20,000 fighters, including many prisoners of war and Armenian militias. The Red troops were outnumbered and outgunned by the basmachi, who, combined with the army of the Emir of Bukhara and the Ural Cossacks, made up a fighting force of approximately 30,000 men.

Survival was the only goal of the Tashkent Soviet, which often sneered at directives from Moscow or Petrograd (including one against the recruitment of POWs into the Red Army). Its policy was simple but brutal: "Strike before you are attacked." As a devastating famine spread throughout Central Asia, the Tashkent troops plundered and massacred the rural population (which in the Fergana Valley alone fell by close to a quarter million between 1917 and 1919), even while they profaned and destroyed the mosques and confiscated religious property. By 1919, the Tashkent Soviet had to face an almost general uprising, but its strategic position, extraordinary fighting spirit, and daring cavalry raids ensured its survival until the Red Army, led by Marshal Mikhail Frunze, broke through to Turkestan in early 1920.

Frunze immediately established a "Turk Commission," consisting of himself and other Russians, to redress the political errors of the Tashkent Soviet. The commis-

sion's approach was pragmatic. To preserve Soviet power, revolution had to be achieved cautiously, in stages. Radical Russian chauvinists, accused of leftist deviation, were ousted from positions of responsibility and replaced by intellectual internationalists, including a high proportion of Jews and Georgians from Moscow.

At the same time, the commission encouraged Muslim fellow-travellers to join the Communist Party and the soviets (councils) at all levels of power. Moderate reformers and nationalists (including Young Bukharans and Young Khivians inspired by the Young Turks' movement and opposed to the rule of the Emir of Bukhara and Khan of Khiva) were accepted *en bloc* into the Communist Party. The cavalry raids were stopped, anti-religious propaganda suspended, and native society was treated with great respect. Religious trust (*waqf*) properties and religious courts abolished by the Tashkent Soviet were restored and mosques reopened.

Most important to the Bolshevik success, however, was the recruitment of Muslim fighting units. These included native militias in the Fergana Valley, the Red Army of Bukhara, a Tatar Rifle Brigade, and a Muslim Cavalry Brigade. At the same time, Muslim soldiers, officers, and advisers were incorporated into all Russian units. These Muslims fought with the same enthusiasm as the Russians, not out of belief in communist dogma, of which they knew little, but in the hope that the reconquest of Turkestan would lead to the eventual liberation of the colonial world. By having Muslims in their ranks, the Bolsheviks prevented the basmachi struggle from ever fully acquiring the character of a colonial or religious war (a strategy that failed to work many decades later during Moscow's war against Afghanistan's mujahedin).

Militarily, Frunze's strategy consisted of occupying the territory around the main cities (particularly Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, and Dushanbe), isolating the enemy in the Tien Shan and Zarafshan mountain ranges and the Turkmen Desert, preventing the guerrillas from taking sanctuary in Afghanistan, and destroying them in open battles once Red units had succeeded in obtaining superiority. The Turkestan Front consisted of some 150,000 troops, outnumbering the basmachi by five to one, even in 1922, when the movement was at its peak. The basmachi resistance, almost unknown beyond Turkestan's border, received virtually no assistance from abroad, except for a few boxes of rifles from Afghanistan.

As a rule, the organization and pacification of the conquered territories was left to Muslims, in particular to the Young Bukharans. One of them, Fayzullah Khojaev, the future First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan, was responsible for the successful pacification of Lokay. Indeed, credit for convincing the Turkestani population to accept Soviet rule redounded solely to the dedication and ability of the early Muslim national communists, who believed that their people would achieve equality with the Russians through communism.

In 1924 the Red Army broke the backbone of the basmachi resistance after a decisive battle in the Turkmen Desert. Red cavalry units and aircraft overwhelmed Junaid Khan, the Turkmen "Commander of the Islamic Army." Almost one million refugees escaped to Afghanistan, an enormous number if one considers that the Muslim population of Central Asia was approximately 10 million people (10,670,000 according to the 1926 census). Many took their livestock with them. In Lokay alone, the number of karakul sheep dropped from 5,000,000 in 1918 to 120,000 in 1924, and the number of horses from

51,000 to 4,750. Sporadic basmachi resistance continued well into the 1930s, but it no longer posed a serious threat.

Muslim communists and fellow-travellers now expected their support of the Bolshevik cause to bear fruit. Like pre-revolution Muslim reformers, the new Muslim communists such as the Uzbek Fayzullah Khojaev and the Kazakh Turar Ryskulov hoped to see Panturkist and even Panislamic dreams fulfilled. They believed that sooner or later all Central Asia would be unified in one state, Soviet Turkestan, and they advocated a geographically convenient administrative division of all former "Russian" Islamic territories into three states: the Tatar-Bashkir state in the Middle Volga region, Muslim Caucasus, and a unified Turkestan comprising Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian lands—Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Tajik. They also championed the formation of a Turkic Communist Party, a national Muslim army, and the expatriation of Russian colonizers from Central Asia. Chagatay Turkic was to be the official language of this immense territory.

This, of course, did not comport well with Bolshevik designs. From the earliest days of their struggle, the Russian Bolsheviks aimed to implement a strictly centralized Marxist-Leninist regime under the tight control of Moscow. In 1919, the same year the Turk Commission was established, Yakov M. Sverdlov, the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, delivered the official line at the Third Congress of the Ukrainian Communist Party: "In all the independent Soviet republics which we have created we must maintain the supremacy of our Communist Party; everywhere the leadership belongs to the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party."

Ideology was the justification of centralized party control, but the Bolsheviks barely disguised their real motives for re-

A poster with tips on modern child-care was but one part of an elaborate Soviet strategy to win over Muslim women—and to weaken the power of the traditional male elites.

taining a firm hold on Central Asia. Grigori Zinoviev, one of Lenin's lieutenants, made the point clearly as early as 1920: "We cannot do without the petroleum of Azerbaijan or the cotton of Turkestan. We take these products, which are necessary for us, not as the former exploiters, but as older brothers bearing the torch of civilization."

It was obvious to Moscow that if the Muslims became one nation, they would pose a serious challenge to the Russians' claim to leadership of the Soviet Union. For this reason Joseph Stalin, General Secretary of the Communist Party and Lenin's successor, deemed the prevention of Muslim unity essential. As soon as the basmachi threat was largely eliminated in 1924, he

set about dismembering Turkestan, dividing it along ethnic and linguistic lines, despite the fierce opposition of most national Muslim communist leaders. What had stood as three administrative territories during the early Soviet period—the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Autonomous Republic of Turkestan, and the People's Republic of Bukhara and Khwarezm (divisions corresponding to earlier tsarist ones)—was over the next 12 years transformed into six states: the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, the Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic, the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, and the Karakalpak Autonomous Republic.

The division was completed by the creation of eight new nationalities (Uzbek, Turkmen, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Karakalpak, Uigur, and Dungan), each with its own written literary language, sometimes artificially conceived, designed to ensure that the Turkestanis would have to resort to Russian in order to communicate with one another. In 1929, by official decree, the Latin alphabet replaced the Arabic script that had long been used in Central Asia. (Ten years later, the Cyrillic alphabet was substituted, further distancing Turkestanis from their cultural patrimony.)

In certain cases, the creation of the new states had some basis in historical reality. The Kazakhs, for instance, answered the Stalinist criteria of a nation—linguistic, cultural, territorial, and economic unity. In Turkmenistan, the consolidation of the great tribal federations into one nation, a trend noticeable since the end of the 18th century, was easy and rapid. Similarly, the Tajik nation, sharing the brilliant Persian cultural tradition, sedentary since ancient times, homogeneous, with no tribal divisions, had no difficulty in adapting to its new nationhood status. The Kyrgyz nation, however, was at the outset an artificial creation. The Kyrgyz could be distinguished from the Kazakhs only by slight differences in their dialect and by their way of life, being semi-nomadic mountain peoples while the Kazakh nomads roamed the steppes. In the case of the Uzbeks, consolidation was even more problematic. Linguistic and cultural differences between former nomads and sedentary people were significant, with many tribal formations keeping close kinship links with the Kazakh tribal federations. The Karakalpak nation, composed of the same tribes and clans that lived in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, was also an entirely contrived state. Its creation, unnecessary and divisive, was an important part of the Soviet's strategy to prevent the Muslim community of Central Asia from building an alliance or even an integrated economic, cultural, and administrative zone.

With the consolidation of Soviet rule in Central Asia in 1928, genuine power sharing with the Muslims came to an end. The implementation of the five-year planning system to socialize the economy called for an ever-growing class of bureaucrats and technocrats. This in turn justified a massive influx of Russians. The Central Asian elites who could have filled administrative slots were deemed ideologically unsound because of their "bourgeois" or "feudal" origins. They were accused of nationalist deviation and liquidated in the bloody Stalinist purges of the 1930s. A whole generation disappeared, including the Muslim communist leaders, and was replaced by a new generation of subservient bureaucrats, mostly of peasant origin and brought up in the Soviet mold. They and their heirs hold powerful positions in the new Central Asian states to this day.

According to Soviet doctrine, articulated by a consensus of Moscow ideologists, the new nations, guided by the Russian "el-

der brother," would gradually draw closer to each other, the final stage of this evolution being their merger into one Soviet nation, with a single Soviet culture. National differences would then disappear, national cultures would survive merely as folklore, and a new Soviet man would emerge "with the psychology and ideals of a Russian industrial worker from Petrograd"—or so dreamed Mikhail Kalinin, the first president of the Soviet Union. This crude utopia, although often criticized and reformulated within the Soviet Union, served as the basis of Soviet nationality policy until the last days of Gorbachev.

But to bring about this "new order," it was necessary to destroy not only the political and national unity of the Turkestanis but also their traditional identity. To this end, Islam, considered like all other religions as a superstition from the past, became the next target. The themes of anti-Muslim propaganda varied little after 1924, when the tenets of the anti-religious campaign were developed. In addition to the usual Marxist arguments directed against all religions—"reactionary, fanciful opium of the toiling masses"—there were specific objections to Islam. Of all the religions, it was claimed to be the most conservative and the least "social" because it sanctified the authority of elders, humiliated women, inculcated submission, fanaticism, intolerance, and xenophobia. Islamic rites and customs, such as circumcision and fasting during Ramadan, were criticized as primitive, barbaric, and unhealthy, while Islamic art and literature were ridiculed as incapable of evolution or progress. This simplistic, pseudoscientific dogma served as the basis of the atheistic education of all Soviet citizens, and was fed to children from the moment they entered an educational establishment at the age of four.

The anti-religious campaign began gradually and more cautiously than in Christian areas in order not to provoke a resurgence of the Basmachi War. The assault was first aimed at Islamic institutions. In 1925 the Soviet government started to expropriate all *waqf* properties, which hitherto had guaranteed the Muslim institutions economic power and independence. By 1930, the process was completed. At the same time, an attack was directed against the Quranic and customary laws. In 1927, all traditional Muslim courts were abolished. Then followed an offensive against religious primary and secondary schools deemed to be "the vehicle of feudal, bourgeois, and clerical culture." There were approximately 8,000 such schools in the General Government of Turkestan alone before 1917. The last ones disappeared in 1928.

Finally, in 1928 the frontal assault against believers began. At the time, the Muslim establishment still boasted an impressive facade. On the eve of the revolution, the Russian empire, excluding Bukhara and Khiva, had 26,000 mosques. In 1927 they were still largely intact. The onslaught was led by the "Union of the Godless," grouping atheist agitators and propagandists. Muslim leaders and their congregations were hunted by the Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle Against Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (CHEKA) and liquidated as parasites or counter-revolutionaries; after 1935 they were accused of being spies for Japan and Germany. Mosques were destroyed, used as warehouses, or left to rot. In 1942 only 1,312 active mosques remained.

When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, Moscow was obliged to reduce the administrative and police pressures against Islam. In 1942, Abdurrahman Rasulaev, a Tatar cleric, approached Stalin with a proposal for normalizing relations between the Soviet government and Islam. Stalin accepted, and a concordat was signed. It granted the religion legal status

Dunes surround a fishing boat that once worked the Aral Sea. Formerly the fourth largest inland body of water, it has lost two-thirds of its volume to irrigation projects. Spewing salty dust over the region, the drying of the Aral has made the local climate hotter and less moist.

and endowed it with an official Islamic Administration. A period of relative tolerance lasted until Stalin's death, when the number of "working" mosques rose to 1,500. The administrative and psychological offensive against Islam was resumed by Nikita Khrushchev in 1953, under the policy of "back to Lenin." During this little-known purge, the number of mosques was reduced to around 350, and the number of registered clerics to at most 3,000. But far from destroying the religious feelings of the Muslim population, this policy only served to fuel underground Sufi and fundamentalist activity.

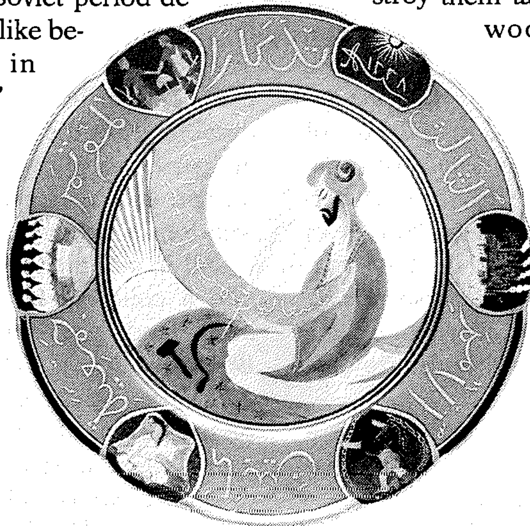
Another danger threatened the Central Asians during the Soviet years, that of being literally submerged by the Russians and other Slavs. The case of the Kazakhs was the most tragic and may yet result in dangerous conflicts with Russia, despite the cautious administration of President Nursultan Nazarbaev.

When Russian rule in the Kazakh steppes replaced that of the khans in the early 1820s, the Russians at first avoided many of the blunders they committed elsewhere. For a time Russian administrators who had fallen in love with the romantic aspect of nomadic life did their best to encourage the revival of traditional Kazakh culture and literature, and to establish real cooperation. Their efforts were short-lived. The immense steppe territory with its scarce population offered a tempting solution to the eternal problem of pre-revolutionary Russia—the peasants' land hunger. In 1891, the first wave of Russian and Ukrainian settlers reached the steppes, not, as in the 18th century, in a disorderly rush of peasants fleeing from serfdom but in an organized migration planned by the administration. By 1914, over one million Slavs had occupied the richest areas along the Chinese border and on the northern fringe of present-day Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs were ruthlessly driven to the poorest regions of central, western, and southern Kazakhstan. With the loss of their pastures and consequently their livestock, their standard of living dropped catastrophically. The inevitable tragic end came in 1916 when the nomad tribes attacked the settlers, only to be slaughtered by a joint force of Russian military and armed peasants. Many survivors were forced to take refuge in China.

In 1917 the Kazakhs still constituted the majority in their land, but the Soviet administration surpassed the tsarist regime in its ruthlessness. During the late 1920s, the Soviets slaughtered the nomads' livestock to destroy their way of life and bring about "collectivization." As a result, one-and-a-half million Kazakhs died of starvation between 1926 and 1939. Finally, during the 1950s, with Khrushchev's encouragement, another huge wave of Russian rural and urban settlers moved into Kazakhstan, reducing the native Kazakhs to the status of a minority. Only in 1989 did the Kazakhs again become the majority in their republic, thanks to their high birth rate.

The flow of Russian immigrants was not

limited to Kazakhstan, of course, and at one time it threatened to engulf the entire region. In 1970, there were almost 12 million Russians and other Europeans in Central Asia, representing 37 percent of the total population. Needless to say, this influential minority tended to enjoy more benefits of the socialist dream than did their Muslim brethren, including everything from jobs and housing to schools and health care. At the end of the Soviet period in Uzbekistan, for example, about 80 percent of the Uzbeks lived in rural settlements, or *kishlaks*, where many of them, particularly women and children, worked in the cotton fields, earning roughly 35 to 40 rubles a month. Their land poisoned by chemical pesticides, Uzbeks suffered from one of the worst health profiles in the world (including an official infant mortality rate of 47 per 1,000, though perhaps closer to 120 per 1,000 in the area around the Aral Sea). Speaking little if any Russian, this "rural proletariat" had almost no chance for mobility through education. One Uzbek near the end of the Soviet period described his plight as "like being an immigrant in your own country," and his was a fate shared by many other native Central Asians. Except for the approved native elites, the Muslim peoples of the five former Soviet republics found the decks stacked against them in almost every aspect of daily life.



Meanwhile, Central Asians saw their faith and traditions vilified, their history distorted, their natural wealth and resources exhausted or destroyed. Diverted for massive cotton irrigation projects, the waters of the region's two great rivers, the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, no longer reach the Aral Sea, and the land around it is becoming a vast salt desert where nothing grows. The poignant words of a great Kazakh poet, Mir-Yakub Dulatov, in his poem of 1906, *Wake Up Kazakh*, were written during the reign of the tsars, but they speak with even sadder eloquence to the experience of those Muslims who lived under the hammer and sickle: "Every year our land and water grow smaller. They are taken by the Russian peasants. The tombs of our glorious ancestors are now in the middle of their village streets. Russian peasants destroy them taking the stones and the wood for their houses. When I think about this my heart is consumed by sorrow like fire."