

**COMMISSAR AND MULLAH:
SOVIET-MUSLIM POLICY
FROM 1917 TO 1924**

by Glenn L. Roberts

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface to This Publication.	4
INTRODUCTION.	6
Chapter One. Soviet Policy and the Tatar Right.	10
Chapter Two. Soviet Policy and the Tatar Left.	22
Chapter Three. Sultan-Galiev and Muslim National-Communism.	38
Chapter Four. The Revolution in Turkestan.	50
Chapter Five. The National Resurgence in Turkestan.	65
Chapter Six. The Soviet Turn to the East.	82
Chapter Seven. The Crisis of 1920.	98
Chapter Eight. Lenin's Campaign Against the Muslim Communists.	131
CONCLUSIONS.	149
Appendix One: Islam Under the Tsars.	152
Appendix Two: Calendar of Events.	177
Bibliography.	184
Glossary.	198

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Preface to This Publication.

The world has changed greatly since this thesis was written. As the final sentences were composed, the Berlin Wall was being dismantled, the Soviets had just withdrawn their last troops from Afghanistan, and rumors of coups were alive in Moscow. On-site personal research led the author to conclude that an undercurrent of Islamic fundamentalism was spreading through Tashkent, Bukhara, and the Caucasus, and that, due to a widespread and ancient cultural affinity with the Islamic Middle East on the part of Soviet Muslims, the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan may well broaden to encompass all of Central Asia.

Events quickly proved the correctness of this view.

Today, after a series of vicious—but very traditional—wars in Chechnya and its environs, and revolts in Ferghana, Tadjikistan, and Kirgizistan, the Central Asian states have attained formal independence from a truncated Russia that has been forced to give up most of its territorial gains hard-won since the mid-18th century. Despite a partial Russian recovery, those populations formerly termed Soviet Muslims have largely turned their attention away from their long-standing resistance to Russian expansionism to join with their co-religionists in focussing their energies on a perceived new adversary—the United States.

Herein lies the lesson of the failed Soviet attempt to transform a traditional Middle East into a Marxist hinterland via military occupation and serial identifications of “missing proletariats,” the likely futility of which was already apparent to the Soviet leadership by late 1920. The United States, currently enmeshed in a parallel adventure in Iraq and Afghanistan, similarly bloody and also seeking to identify various “progressive” local elements in the hope of

undermining a cultural, social, and religious opposition little different from that faced by the Soviets, seems entirely unaware that its program to export Western democracy to the Muslim Middle East follows closely in the steps of its erstwhile rival, though employing immeasurably more potent weapons, torrents of money, and satellite-backed mass media. Now in their third year of an increasingly desperate occupation, the Americans would do well to put aside for a time their tomes on Washington and Jefferson and take up the study of Muhammad and Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev. Thus they may yet avoid the fate of the Soviets.

--Glenn L Roberts, November 12, 2006

INTRODUCTION.

High demographic growth among Soviet Muslims, the revolution in Iran and the Soviet debacle in Afghanistan have given new importance to the Muslim experience in the Soviet Union. While the topic of Islam in the Soviet Union is not as obscure as it once was, it remains a neglected aspect of Soviet studies, and one with special complications. Not only are sources subject to the same ideological and Cold War biases as other topics in Soviet history, but most historians of the Soviet Union have traditionally been even more Western-oriented than their Tsarist-era counterparts.¹ A veil of secrecy maintained by bland pronouncements of the “friendship of peoples,”² together with Soviet support for political causes in the Islamic world, have until recently put off many Islamic and Asian specialists who might otherwise have investigated the topic. Despite its development into what is perhaps the most sensitive security issue in the USSR today, specialists remain rare, first-hand information scarce, and the public, even Russian historians, only dimly aware of the role that Islam has played in Russian history. One authoritative textbook, for instance, devotes not a single section to Islam, makes no reference to Islam in the index, and makes few allusions to Islam within the text itself.³ This, despite the conversion of the Volga Bulgars to Islam in the 10th century AD,⁴ amounting to almost one thousand years of continuous Russian interaction with Muslims—some 300 years longer than occurred in Spain.

Islam attracted the attention of the Party within a few days of the October Revolution. Before the end of 1917 the Bolshevik leadership had recognized Russia’s Muslims as a significant political force and by 1919 formulated a policy to deal with them, imposing narrowly conceived Western structures of regional

¹ For example, see E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution: 1917-1923, Vol I* (New York: MacMillan, 1950), pp 314-339.

² For a comprehensive treatment, see Lowell Tillet, *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1969).

³ Riasanovsky, Nicholas V., *A History of Russia*, 4th ed. (New York: 1984).

⁴ Cross, Samuel H., *The Russian Primary Chronicle* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1930), p. 183-207.

nationalism in order to diminish their political influence. This policy of “compartmentalization” elevated minor ethnic and linguistic traits, sometimes amounting to no more than minor tribal dialects, to the status of nationhood while suppressing broader political trends, especially those rooted in the heritage of Islam. The existence of this policy during the revolutionary era has long been alleged,⁵ but to the writer’s knowledge no systematic effort has been undertaken to verify it. It has also been suggested that concern with the political demands of domestic Muslim Communists was a factor in the Party’s decision to suspend the revolution in Asia after the Baku Congress of September 1920.⁶ No systematic study has been undertaken to demonstrate this either. While the latter question cannot be fully covered in this work, which focuses on domestic policy, I hope to show that a crisis in Soviet-Muslim relations in the year 1920, the result of growing resistance to the Soviets’ Muslim policy, constituted sufficient and reasonable cause for this suspension, clearly demonstrating that the demands of Soviet Muslims were the primary factor in suspending the Revolution in Asia.

In addition to this theme of political conflict—the dominant theme of this study—a second path is explored. This path was the more fundamental conflict that developed over class war and social revolution, and most particularly over Moscow’s efforts to eradicate Islam. This social conflict, which had its roots in Marxism, Russian colonialism and fundamental differences in culture, greatly aggravated the political tensions. In tracing the development of these two themes—political conflict over Muslim autonomy, and social revolution in a religious and traditional society—this Thesis concludes that Soviet Muslim policy succeeded politically in that the Party survived the challenge of the Muslim Communists and imposed its will for decades to come. On the other hand, this study concludes that Soviet Muslim policy failed “socially,” when, between 1920 and 1922, the Party was forced to rescind its social measures. Islam not only survived the challenge posed by social stratification and class war during the

⁵ Chokaev, Mustafa, ‘Turkestan and the Soviet Regime,’ in *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol. XVIII, July, 1931, Part iii, p. 405.

⁶ Bennigsen, Alexandre A., and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy in the Colonial World* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 77.

revolutionary era, but experienced increased popularity. And, despite renewed repressions under Stalin, it continues to attract adherents in the Soviet Union today.

Inclusivist religious-based nationalism among Soviet Muslims, here termed “pan-Muslim nationalism,” was central to the Muslims’ resistance. This political conception was the actual but unacknowledged heir of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani’s reformist pan-Islam of the late 19th century.⁷ Although disguised and distorted by Muslim national-communists, nowhere else has reformist pan-Islam come as close to the actual reins of power as in Russia between 1918 and 1921. The failure of the Muslim national-communists to halt the growing power of Moscow relegated this pan-Muslim nationalism to academia, probably permanently, since narrower national conceptions now predominate among Soviet Muslims as in the rest of the Islamic world.⁸

In the following pages the two themes of political conflict between the Russian Communist Party and pan-Muslim nationalists, and social conflict between European and Islamic traditions and institutions are traced in a narrative that begins with the collapse of Tsarism, and ends with the re-imposition of centralized control and Russian ethnic rule in 1921-22. Chapter One details the failure of the Party’s pre-October 1917 nationality policy and traces the impact of Russian clashes with Muslim nationalists on this policy after October. Chapter Two measures the effect that Bolshevik consolidation in 1918 had upon the evolving political conceptions of the Volga Tatars and describes the emergence of a Soviet nationality policy tailored to the Tatars but applicable to all of Russia’s Muslims. Chapter Three presents the ideas of the foremost political theorist among the Muslim Communists, the Volga Tatar Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev. Chapters Four and Five describe the evolution of Soviet-Muslim relations in Turkestan, Chapter Four concentrating on 1917-18, and Chapter Five tracing the application of Soviet Tatar policy to Turkestan in 1919-1920. Chapter Six focuses on the

⁷ For a summary of al-Afghani’s ideas, see Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798-1939* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 103-129.

⁸ The best popular summary of Muslim national-communism available is Bennigsen and Wimbush’s *Muslim National Communism*. Pages 41-81 especially relate to this thesis.

growing resistance and organization of the Muslim Communists and their efforts to gain control of the socialist movement to export revolution to Asia in 1919 and 1920. Chapter Seven follows the development of these efforts through the critical year of 1920 as opposition to Russian Communist rule spread from the Muslim Communists to the rest of Russia's Muslims, reaching a climax during the Baku Congress of the People's of the East in September. In the last chapter, Chapter Eight, Lenin cancels plans to export revolution to Asia due to apprehension that the Muslim Communists might co-opt new Soviet states in Asia, and then initiates a campaign to control the Muslim Communists and to suppress domestic revolts.

At the end of this Thesis a comprehensive calendar and glossary have been added, the latter including personal names. In addition, a supplemental article is provided: "Islam Under the Tsars," an extensive account of Russian-Muslim relations from the medieval period to 1917, providing important background information for the events of the revolutionary period. The author recommends those unfamiliar with Soviet-Muslim relations especially to read "Islam Under the Tsars" before reading the Thesis itself.

Chapter One

Soviet Policy and the Tatar Right.

Soviet Nationality Policy in 1917.

The role that nationalism should play in the socialist revolution was much debated among the Bolsheviks. Although most Marxists, including the leaders of the RSDLP(b), opposed any form of nationalism, in On the Right of Nations to Self-Determination published in June 1913, Lenin insisted that, although political unity was the ultimate goal of the Bolsheviks and federalism was unacceptable, national movements nevertheless had the right to complete secession from Russia.⁹ In answer to objections from the Bolshevik Left that after the Revolution these movements might assume a life of their own and oppose a socialist regime, Lenin expressed the hope that the proletariats of the various national movements would perceive that their interests lay with membership in the RSDLP(b) and oppose secessionist movements on the part of their respective national bourgeoisies before such movements actually attained independence.¹⁰ However, the Left remained skeptical that Lenin's reservations on secession would guarantee Bolshevik control.

At the Seventh All-Russian Bolshevik Conference in Petrograd in April 1917, Stalin offered a compromise between Pyatakov's "down with borders" slogan and Lenin's "right of nations to self-determination." In Stalin's view the Party should continue to interpret Lenin's slogan as meaning the right to political secession, but in each case this right should be conditional on whether secession was beneficial to the world proletariat:

This...question must be settled by the party of the proletariat in each particular case independently....A people has the right to secede, it may or may not exercise that right, according to circumstances. Thus we are at liberty to agitate

⁹ Lenin, V.I., 'O Prave Natsii na Samoopredelenie,' in *Izbrannye Proizvedeniya, Vol. I.* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1960), p. 581-630.

¹⁰ Lenin, V.I., 'Speech on the National Question,' April 29, 1917, *Collected Works*, 4th ed., Vol. XXIV (Moscow: Progress, 1964), p. 298.

for or against secession, according to the interests of the proletariat, of the proletarian revolution....¹¹

In Stalin's conception, then, the Party should reserve to itself the power to avert secessions before they gathered momentum, thus enhancing its guarantees of control.

On May 3 the Conference adopted Stalin's views.¹² However, since Stalin's assignment of veto power to the Party differed only in emphasis from views to be found in previous articles published by Lenin,¹³ the Conference's resolution should be seen as an effective endorsement of Lenin's position and a repudiation of the Left. This gave the Party in 1917 extreme flexibility in nationality affairs—free to proclaim adherence to orthodox Marxism, but at the same time benefiting from a liberal stance on the national question.¹⁴

After the October Revolution, in line with Party policy, the Bolsheviks issued a Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia:

The Council of People's Commissars has resolved to base its activity in the matter of the nationalities of Russia on the following principles;

1. Equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia.
2. The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, up to secession and formation of an independent State.
3. Abolition of all and any national and national-religious privileges and restrictions.
4. Free development of national minorities and ethnic groups inhabiting Russia.¹⁵

¹¹ Stalin, J., *Marxism and the National Question: Selected Writings and Speeches* (New York: International Publishers, 1942), p. 71.

¹² All dates are in the Julian calendar (i.e., "Old Style"), until February 1, 1918. On this date the Soviet government added 13 days to the calendar to bring Russia into accordance with the Gregorian calendar used in the rest of Europe. Some localities did not make the change until some time after February 1 and some localities made the change on their own initiative already in 1917, hence the precise timing of an event in late 1917 and early 1918 is sometimes difficult to determine.

¹³ These differences perhaps only reflected their public personae. It is generally accepted by historians that Stalin acted as little more than a mouthpiece for Lenin in nationality affairs, and that the true author of Stalin's stated positions was Lenin.

¹⁴ Lenin, V.I., 'Resolution on the National Question,' May 3, 1917, *Works*, XXIV, p. 302.

¹⁵ McCauley, Martin, ed., *The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State 1917-1921: Documents* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

But, despite Lenin's hopes that this Declaration would satisfy the aspirations of minority nationalists until the Revolution spread to Europe, declarations of independence proliferated through the remainder of 1917. In response, again over the opposition of the other Bolshevik leaders, Lenin insisted on granting recognition to these declarations. In answer to the dissenters, Lenin now asserted that, like Russia, each nationality must experience its own socialist revolution. After the local proletariat installed socialism, Lenin assured the Central Committee, each nation would then apply to rejoin Soviet Russia. So confident was Lenin of this, that he issued a second declaration specifically endorsing national secessions on the part of Russia's Muslims. The Appeal of the Sovnarkom to the Muslims of Russia and the East appeared in December 1917 in the name of the new Commissariat of Nationalities (Narkonmats) over the signatures of Lenin and Stalin:

Moslems of Russia, Tatars of the Volga and the Crimea, Kirghiz and Sarts [i.e. Uzbeks] of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tatars of Trans-Caucasia, Chechens and mountain Cossacks! All you, whose mosques and shrines have been destroyed, whose faith and customs have been violated by the Tsars and oppressors of Russia! Henceforward your beliefs and customs, your national and cultural institutions, are declared free and inviolable! Build your national life freely and without hindrance. It is your right. Know that your rights, like those of all the peoples of Russia, will be protected by the might of the Revolution, by the Councils of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies!¹⁶

At the same time, to emphasize his willingness to work with Muslims as equals, the Suyumbike Tower of Kazan, an historical monument of cultural importance to the Volga Tatars, was transferred to the control of Tatar Socialists, and the Quran of Othman, reputed to be one of only seven original Qurans still existing, was returned to the custody of Muslims in Petrograd.¹⁷

¹⁶ Degras, Jane, ed., *Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy, Vol I: 1917-1924* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1951), p. 16.

¹⁷ Rorlich, Azade-Ayse, *The Volga Tatars: a Profile in National Resilience* (Stanford, Calif: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), p. 131.

These innovations to Lenin's pre-October nationality policy—recognition of independence, the Appeal to Muslims, and the return of artifacts—did not reflect a desire to co-exist with independent Muslim states in Russia. Lenin felt that the RSDLP(b), as the sole possessor of proletarian consciousness in peasant Russia, should be the sole political power wherever possible.¹⁸ Rather these innovations demonstrate Lenin's continued pragmatism in nationality affairs. This flexibility manifested itself not only in deceptive revolutionary slogans but also in a tendency to allow misimpressions among supporters of the Bolsheviks indefinitely to continue.¹⁹ For example, the Kipchaks (a Kazakh tribe) believed that the word "Bolshevik" was Russian for "Kipchak." Jangeldin, the Bolshevik commissar among the Kipchaks, did not disabuse them of this notion, and the Kipchaks remained among the most loyal Bolshevik allies during the Civil War.²⁰

The Tatar Independence Movement.

Under the Provisional Government, Russia's Muslims established a considerable degree of cultural, political, and even military autonomy. By the end of 1917 this drive for autonomy had resulted in secessionist movements in Crimea, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia.²¹ In the middle Volga region former Ittifak²² politicians among the Tatars and Bashkirs constructed the core of an Islamic state based on their historic homeland and claimed the right to govern all of Russia's Muslims. This core, consisting of a National Executive Council (Milli Merkezi Shuro), a National Assembly (Milli Majlis),²³ and a Central Military

¹⁸ In the weeks after the October Revolution, Lenin resisted sharing power even with the Left SRs, allies of the Bolsheviks in the October Revolution. Only the temporary resignation of several of the more moderate members of the Central Committee induced him to acquiesce in the participation of Left SRs in the Soviet government. See Martin McCauley, *The Soviet Union Since 1917* (NY: Longman, 1981), p. 23.

¹⁹ Spector, Ivar, *The Soviet Union and the Muslim World, 1917-1958* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington, 1959), p. 37.

²⁰ Carrere d'Encausse, Helene, in Allworth, Edward, ed., *Central Asia: A Century of Russian Rule* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1967), p. 238.

²¹ Pipes, Richard, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1964), p. 79-107.

²² See Glossary at the end of this Thesis.

²³ Pipes, p. 78. In Ottoman Turkey, a 'millet' was a religious community which bore legal responsibility for its subjects in non-political matters. The adjective 'milli' was often employed by Muslim reformers in the 19th century in an attempt to communicate the new concept of nationalism to an unfamiliar public. Use of this term for a variety of concepts was as confusing to the Muslims of Russia and Southwest Asia at the

Council (Harbi Shuro),²⁴ proclaimed independence in late 1917 as the “Idel-Ural Republic,” named after the older Tatar name for their homeland.²⁵

Although the Sovnarkom implicitly recognized this proto-state when it issued the Declaration of Rights, its attitude toward the Tatar nationalists changed as the Soviet government consolidated its position. In early 1918 the Bolsheviks refrained from further conciliatory moves, and began to treat the Tatars as a political threat. Most disturbing to the Bolsheviks was control by the Central Military Council (Harbi Shuro) of a number of Muslim military units.²⁶ These units had been established in the summer of 1917 with the permission of the Provisional Government in response to a “request” from the National Council (Milli Shuro), which the Provisional Government had not felt strong enough to refuse.²⁷ The Bolsheviks’ first encounter with Muslim units was in August 1917, when the “Savage” Division, the largest Muslim unit in the Tsarist army, spearheaded Kornilov’s drive on Petrograd.²⁸ This event also demonstrated the usefulness of leftist Muslims to the Bolsheviks when they helped to stop this drive through fraternization with the Savage Division.

In early 1918 the Muslim National Council in Kazan (Milli Merkezi Shuro) was neutral, proclaiming itself to favor “neither Kornilov nor Lenin.”²⁹ However, due to the previous favoritism that the Tsarist state had shown Muslims and regardless of the conciliatory moves by the Sovnarkom, the Bolsheviks and Russians in the soviets tended to view Muslims in general as intrinsically counter-revolutionary even when not actually assisting the opposition. Hence on January 31, 1918, the

turn of the century as it is to contemporary readers, and tended to obscure important differences among those who used the term.

²⁴ Zenkovsky, Serge, *Pan-Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 158.

²⁵ Rorlich, p. 132. In *The Modern History of Soviet Central Asia* (NY: Praeger, 1964), p. 100, Geoffrey Wheeler emphasizes the partial nature of Tatar moves towards autonomy at this time. However, the incomplete state of the Tatar organizations seems to have been due more to disagreement over methods than over goals.

²⁶ Zenkovsky, p. 171.

²⁷ Zenkovsky, p. 159.

²⁸ Zenkovsky, p. 155. The “Savage” Division was composed of Muslim volunteer cavalry recruited from Azerbaijan, Dagestan, and Turkmenistan in that order. See Ellis, C.H., *The British ‘Intervention’ in Transcaspia: 1918-19* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of Cal. Press, 1963), p. 137; Swietochowski, Tadeusz, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), p. 76.

²⁹ Zenkovsky, p. 170.

Red Guard occupied Orenburg and, while fighting General Dutov's Cossacks, dispersed the local Kazakh and Bashkir committees. At the same time detachments from the Red fleet suppressed the Crimean Tatars in Simferopol.³⁰

In February 1918 the Tatars gathered what forces they could in Kazan for a military congress. This aroused fear on the part of the Revolutionary Kazan Soviet, one of many soviets in Muslim areas that were competing with Muslim organizations for local control in 1918.³¹ The fact that the Muslim troops suffered as much as did the Russian troops from desertion and a decline in morale due to the general collapse of the Imperial Army did not reassure the Soviet government in Petrograd, which feared, at a time when only a few hundred soldiers could decide the loyalty of entire provinces, that the congress might declare Tatar support for the Whites, with serious repercussions among Russia's other Muslims. However, the Bolsheviks held the loyalty of a number of leftist Tatars, and in late February the rising tensions between the Kazan Soviet and the Harbi Shuro caused these leftists to throw in their cause with the Kazan Soviet.³² On February 26 the Kazan Soviet formed a Revolutionary High Command to oppose the Harbi Shuro and declared martial law.³³ The arrest of 200 leading Tatars by the Kazan Soviet was followed by several days of clashes with supporters of the Harbi Shuro and the declaration of a new Tatar national regime in eastern Kazan across the Bulak River, which the Bolsheviks pejoratively termed *Zabulachnaya Respublika* or "The Trans-Bulak Republic."³⁴ Soviet preoccupation with the German offensive in Courland³⁵ then distracted Moscow from the conflict, and on February 28 both sides in Kazan signed a truce. The Tatars of the TransBulak Republic proceeded with plans to set up an independent national state, but, once

³⁰ Zenkovsky, p. 171.

³¹ Rorlich, p. 133.

³² Zenkovsky, p. 171.

³³ Rorlich, p. 133.

³⁴ Zenkovsky, p. 174; Rorlich, p. 133.

³⁵ As a result of Trotsky's policy of "no-war, no-peace" in the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk, on the morning of February 18, 1918, the Germans renewed their advance into Russia. On March 3, when the Bolsheviks returned to the table and signed a treaty fully accepting the demands of the Central Powers, the Germans halted their advance. See McCauley, *Soviet Union*, p. 25.

the Brest-Litovsk Treaty was concluded in late March, detachments of Red Guards from Moscow crushed what remained of Tatar national independence.³⁶

Soviet Nationality Policy in 1918.

This suppression of an embryonic Tatar state reflected a growing perception at the highest levels of the Russian Communist Party in early 1918 that Lenin's policy of recognizing national independence movements had been a mistake.³⁷ In the Ukraine, nationalists had conspired with the Central Powers, even appearing at the side of the Germans with their own demands in the negotiations at Brest-Litovsk.³⁸ In Finland, the Finnish Social Democrats became embroiled in a Civil War with Finnish Whites which soon resulted in intervention by German troops.³⁹ In the Crimea, Tatars had sought to affiliate with the Ottoman Turks, who were once again referring to the Black Sea as "an Ottoman Sea."⁴⁰ In the Caucasus, the Turks had proclaimed their intention to annex Baku and were already squabbling with their German allies over its oil and over who should occupy Georgia.⁴¹

The active cooperation of minority national movements with the enemies of Soviet power led to a fundamental change in Bolshevik nationality policy. On January 16, 1918, the Sovnarkom issued a Declaration of Rights of Working and Exploited People. This declaration mentioned for the first time a federal government:

³⁶ Zenkovsky, p. 177-8.

³⁷ In March 1918 the "All-Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party-Bolshevik," or RSDLP(b), changed its name to the "All-Russian Communist Party-Bolshevik," rendered here as RKP.

³⁸ Carr, E.H., *History of Soviet Russia: The Bolsheviks Revolution, Vol. III: Soviet Russia and the World*, (NY: MacMillan, 1953), p. 37. In an effort to reverse its recognition of an independent Ukraine in November 1917, the Sovnarkom proclaimed a federal union between Soviet Russia and Soviet Ukraine on January 22, 1918, the capital of the latter being located in Kharkov, protected by Soviet troops. But Ukrainian nationalists flocked to defend the Rada in Kiev, and appealed to Imperial Germany for protection, which recognized Kiev when it signed the "Bread Peace" on February 8. The Brest-Litovsk Treaty, signed a month later, required the dismantling of the Kharkov government.

³⁹ Kirby, D.G., ed. and tr., *Finland and Russia, 1808-1920, A Selection of Documents* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), p. 213-240.

⁴⁰ Hostler, C. Warren, *Turkism and the Soviets: the Turks of the World and their Political Objectives* (New York: Praeger, 1957), p. 51.

⁴¹ Pipes, p. 211.

The Russian Soviet Republic is established on the basis of a free union of free nations, as a federation of national Soviet republics...[to which] the workers and peasants of each nationality [have] the right to make an independent decision, at their own plenipotentiary congress of Soviets, whether they desire, and, if so, on what basis, to participate...⁴²

This declaration represented two changes over Lenin's former open-ended nationality policy. First, the Bolsheviks finally embraced (in theory at least) federalism—a policy Lenin had vehemently opposed for years as an intolerable concession to nationalism. However, as a step backward from the 1917 policy of recognition of full national independence, federalism was no longer a concession in 1918, but a step towards centralization. It is interesting to note that in the Party discussions on how to halt the trend of secessions, the option of federalism was said to have been first suggested by Stalin—perhaps an indication of Stalin's innate nationalistic outlook.⁴³

Second, since Party policy had now switched from concession to centralization, a change in doctrine was needed to rationalize the change. Stalin's views in his 1913 work Marxism and the National Question⁴⁴ were expanded and adopted at the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets. These views, which Stalin voiced on several occasions after October 1917, are summarized in the phrase “proletarian self-determination.” This conception re-interpreted national self-determination in terms of class struggle, and was employed as a rationale to avoid having to recognize any further secessions:

All this points to the necessity of interpreting the principle of self-determination as a right not of the bourgeoisie, but of the working masses of the given nation. The principle of self-determination must be an instrument in the struggle for socialism and must be subordinated to the principles of socialism.⁴⁵

⁴² Carr, I, p. 117, 139.

⁴³ Carr, I., p. 132.

⁴⁴ Stalin, *Marxism*, p. 7-68.

⁴⁵ Carr, *Bolshevik Revolution*, I, p. 266. Where Lenin's conception had allowed the right of secession to the bourgeoisie of a national minority, Stalin's conception restricted this right to only the proletariat of that national minority (which presumably would have no interest in seceding), hence “proletarian” self-determination. Again it should be noted that the true author of “Stalin's” position was very likely Lenin.

In line with Lenin's long-standing preference for territorial as opposed to extraterritorial nationalism, the new federal structure would be based exclusively on territorial principles. This way, the Party could maintain control over the decisive institutions, e.g., education, while placating local nationalists with formal but meaningless "national" boundaries.⁴⁶ Like the innovations of late 1917, the new policy of federalism was not conceived with long-term administrative goals in mind—the Bolsheviks still expected an early extension of the Russian Revolution to Europe. Rather, the Declaration was made in a mood of growing apprehension since, far from secessionist movements applying to join Soviet Russia, they were joining or being occupied by the Central Powers, and the Bolsheviks, having aided in the destruction of the Tsarist army, were discovering that except for the vastness of Russian territory they were defenseless should Imperial Germany attempt to occupy the rest of the country.

As the spring of 1918 turned into summer, the threat posed by German occupation receded, but the threat that the Bolsheviks felt to their position as the Party of the proletariat in a backward country, now increasingly perceived to be hostile to Bolshevik rule, led the Bolsheviks to continue tightening their nationality policy.⁴⁷ In July, the ideas of the Declaration were expanded into the first Soviet Constitution, which, in providing for "autonomous regions" inside a Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), institutionalized federalism. Like the Declaration in January, the purpose of the Constitution was not to construct a federal bureaucracy, since bureaucracy, as an instrument of state, was similarly expected to "wither away" upon completion of the World Revolution, but was rather, like Stalin's "proletarian self-determination" formula, designed to forestall future secessions. As for those regions that had already seceded due to the failure of proletarian movements within these new nations, military coercion became the new pattern. In January of 1918, reunification with the Ukraine had

⁴⁶ Under Stalin this policy was summed up in the phrase "national in form, but socialist in content."

⁴⁷ In July the Left SRs broke with the government over Brest-Litovsk and initiated a revolt. Although quickly suppressed, the SR revolt, along with the consolidation of White armies and the Allied intervention in July and August, evoked harsh responses from the Bolsheviks and quickly mushroomed into the Civil War.

failed because, due to the proximity of the Imperial German army, the Bolsheviks were forced to rely primarily on non-violent means for effecting reunification. But after a revolt in the Ukraine by local Bolsheviks failed to establish Bolshevik control in August 1918, the Red Army successfully invaded the following January. Thus, in the Ukraine as in Kazan, reunification was ultimately accomplished only through direct use of the Red Army.

By the autumn of 1918, the Part's new ad hoc formula in its treatment of minority nationalities had become: (i) a pseudo-federal structure to appease the milder nationalists in the Soviet fold; (ii) a single Communist Party to ensure control of the new pseudo-states; (iii) Stalin's "proletarian self-determination" formula to disguise the actual abandonment of self-determination; and (iv) direct employment of the Red Army against those regimes which had already established independence from Russia and which resisted internal pressures for reunification. Thus it can be said that the whole structure of federation, formal recognition of secession, and regional autonomy amounted to no more than an elaborate façade for a traditional Russian imperial state held together by a centralized bureaucracy headquartered in Moscow and supervised by ethnic Great Russians or Russianized minorities, a state that was poised to use a reconstructed Russian imperial army under ex-Tsarist officers for a period of renewed expansion against the national minorities.

The Baku Soviet.

Any treatment of Soviet-Muslim relations in the months immediately following the October Revolution would not be complete without an account of events in the Caucasus and Azerbaijan. Nowhere else among the ruins of the Tsarist state were relations between Russians and Muslims so strained. Since the first half of the 19th century the various peoples of the northern Caucasus had resented Russian settlement. Under the Provisional Government a national movement grew briefly, only to fall under the sway in the autumn of fundamentalist Sufi imams who preached a traditional pan-Islamic jihad against all Westerners. In the words of one such leader, "I am spinning a rope with which to hang all...those

who write from left to right....”⁴⁸ A more explicit statement of conservative pan-Islam would be difficult to find. After the October coup, these peoples no longer felt constrained and fell upon the Russian and Cossack settlements in the cities of the northern Caucasus and along the Terek causing much bloodshed.⁴⁹ The seizure of Petrovsk (Makhachkala) in March 1918 completed a long-delayed political reassertion and cut Azerbaijan off from the rest of Russia.⁵⁰

In the city of Baku a Bolshevik-dominated soviet had emerged after the October Revolution. This Baku Soviet dispatched aid to the beleaguered Russians on the Terek, but was frustrated when the Muslims of Azerbaijan took advantage of the Revolution to form their own provisional government and a Muslim militia under a political party called the Musavat. In December 1917 the Azerbaijanis declared solidarity with the Dagestanis and began to disarm the thousands of Russian troops who had abandoned the War and were crossing Azerbaijan on their way back to Russia. In January 1918 units of the new Azerbaijani national army, including a regiment of the “Savage” Division, killed up to 1,000 Russians on a troop train who resisted this disarming.⁵¹ This “Shamkhor” incident was followed by organized attacks on Russians throughout Azerbaijan. The Baku Soviet took the lead in a counter-offensive, the clashes escalating steadily until March 31, when, at the instigation of the Baku Soviet, the Armenian Dashnak militia suddenly joined the struggle and fell upon the Muslims of Baku, who were a minority in the city.⁵² Up to 3,000 of the Muslim population were killed, in partial repayment for the Young Turk genocide of Armenians in Anatolia in 1915. Outraged Azerbaijanis, Dagestanis, and some half-hearted Georgians fulfilling a treaty obligation then attacked Baku, but failed to dislodge the Soviet. Despite the fact that diplomatic relations were established early

⁴⁸ All major scripts in the Islamic world are written from right to left, including Arabic, Persian, and Turkish.

⁴⁹ Pipes, p. 97.

⁵⁰ Swietochowski, Tadeusz, *Russian Azerbaijan, 1905-1920: The Shaping of National Identity in a Muslim Community* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), p. 103.

⁵¹ Suny, Ronald, *The Baku Commune, 1917-18* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton, 1972), p. 199.

⁵² Suny, p. 216-224. Due to Tsarist policy, the Armenians had extensive military training, whereas the Muslims, being exempt from the draft, had no such experience. Armenians played an important role in the Revolution—the Armenian-Bolshevik alliance was essential for the survival of the Revolution in the southern regions, paralleling Lenin’s reliance on the Lettish regiments in European Russia.

among the several governments that had emerged in the Transcaucasus after October 1917, i.e., the Georgian Mensheviks, the Armenians of Yerevan, and the Musavat of Azerbaijan, the Baku Soviet ignored these formal relations and adopted an attitude that interpreted all national and ethnic conflicts purely in terms of class struggle: "Any peace delegation would serve no purpose. There has not been any fratricidal struggle in Baku. There was and is continuing beyond the limits of Baku a civil war against counterrevolutionary beys and khans."⁵³

Caught up in more immediate concerns until late spring 1918, the Party took little notice of the events in Baku and made no formal adjustment to those events in its nationality policy. But news of the conflict between local Muslims and the Baku Soviet spread rapidly and already by January 1918 was exerting an intangible but nevertheless strong force on relations between Russians and Muslims throughout Russia, and must be held partly responsible for Petrograd's decision to crush the Tatar republic in March and for the entire subsequent course of events.

⁵³ Swietochowski, p. 117.

Chapter Two

Soviet Policy and the Tatar Left.

Emergence of the Tatar Left.

With the suppression of overt manifestations of Tatar and Bashkir nationalism, a new phase ensued in Bolshevik-Tatar relations. The focus of this new development was the Tatar Left, which by splitting Tatar ranks had contributed to the suppression of the Idel-Ural committees and the Trans-Bulak Republic. However, this Left soon became the focus of a renewed struggle with Tatar nationalism, no longer over formal independence, but over autonomy within the Russian Communist Party. To understand the nature of this struggle, and the significance it acquired for Bolshevik-Muslim relations it is necessary to examine Tatar nationalism in Russia more deeply.

Despite their proclamation of the Idel-Ural Republic, it had not been the desire of most Tatars to construct a state separate from the other Muslims of Tsarist Russia. In early 1917, building on their Ittifak experience of the pre-war period, the Tatars had emerged as the main proponents of extraterritorial autonomy among Russia's Muslims, arguing, at the First All-Russian Congress of Muslims in Kazan on May 1, 1917, in favor of limited autonomy until the Provisional Government could convene the Constituent Assembly.⁵⁴ The Tatars were opposed at the May Congress by many of the other Muslims of Russia, especially those from the peripheries: the Crimea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Even though the congress came to amicable agreements on a number of other issues such as land redistribution, labor reform, and religious education,⁵⁵ these delegates from Russia's periphery outvoted the Tatars on the national question, endorsing a federal concept of territorial-based republics. At subsequent congresses and conferences the Tatars consistently sought to reverse this decision. Therefore non-Tatar delegates ceased attending Tatar-

⁵⁴ Bennigsen, Alexandre A. and Chantal Quelquejay, *Les Mouvements Nationaux chez les Musulmans de Russie* (Paris: Mouton, 1960), p. 65-9 ; Zenkovsky, p. 145-9.

⁵⁵ It was at this congress that the Milli Merhazi Shuro, Harbi Shuro, and Millis Majlis were created, with the intention of exercising their jurisdiction over all of Russia's Muslims.

sponsored events and proceeded to set up their own national organizations unilaterally, based on their respective territories without Tatar involvement or approval.⁵⁶ By late summer 1917, the Taars accepted this state of affairs and began to organize their own state, but only reluctantly and without renouncing the theoretical supersedence of their own national organizations over those of the unresponsive peripheries. Continued debate within Tatar ranks on the territorial issue delayed the formation of the Idel-Ural Republic and was largely responsible for its weakness in the face of Soviet pressure in the spring of 1918.⁵⁷

The defeat of extraterritorial autonomy at the May Congress has been almost universally interpreted as a defeat for pan-Islamic political notions and a victory for territorial nationalism. Various rationales have been suggested for this, for instance that the “rich bourgeoisie” among the Ittifik were isolated from the Muslim masses, or that Western secular and regional nationalism had become dominant among the Central Asians who now adhered to a “Turkistani nation,” and among the Azerbaijanis who now wished to set up an “Azerbaijani nation.” These interpretations are incorrect. To understand the true significance of the May Congress and the position that pan-Islamic notions actually held, a second factor must be considered: Muslim attitudes toward social reform. In Russia the Tatars had been the chief sponsors of Jadidism—the program to modernize education, secularize thought, and reform the largely static mental and institutional world which Russia’s Muslims had inherited from the recent past. While some Muslims from the peripheral regions were also in the forefront of Jadidism—e.g., the Crimean Gasprinsky—the peripheral areas held the highest concentration of conservative Muslims and mullahs, those elements that had consistently opposed the Jadids. At the May Congress the most bitter split was in fact not over rival conceptions of nationalism, but over efforts to raise the status of women. On the first day of the conference the 195 clerics and ulama, mostly Turkestanis from Central Asia and Dagestanis from the Caucasus, objected to the presence of the some 200 women delegates, and attempted to shout down

⁵⁶ Rorlich, p. 129-130.

⁵⁷ Pipes, p. 158.

proposals to abolish the veil, prohibit polygamy, prohibit marriage of minors, and establish equal rights to inheritance. A Muslim conference in Baku preparatory to the May Congress in Moscow had witnessed similar confrontations between conservative Dagestanis and liberal Azerbaijanis.⁵⁸ At the May Congress, only after prolonged debate in which the clerics and ulama found themselves almost isolated was a resolution passed proclaiming equal rights for women. The social conservatives then fought to reverse this decision, circulating a petition to that effect signed by 224 delegates. (Several had changed their minds after they realized the implications of the resolutions for which they had just voted.) As one imam from Central Asia exclaimed, in reference to the resolution on polygamy: “How would I be able to appear before those who sent me to this congress?... What can I tell them if this motion is not revised?”⁵⁹

This split over social issues profoundly affected the debate on nationalism—in fact, without the clash over the status of women, the clerics and ulama would likely have supported the Tatars’ pan-Islamic agenda of political and cultural centralization, in accordance with the traditional Islamic ideal of closing ranks against non-Muslims. However, the shock the traditionalists felt when confronted with a Tatar-led majority in favor of social reform strongly influenced their perception of the Congress as a whole. A perception that the congress was controlled by secular Jadids bent on undermining the most sacrosanct elements of the Sharia—its family codes—led most clerics to vote against extraterritorial autonomy in order to protect the Sharia.⁶⁰ While in one sense it may be pointless to distinguish genuine sympathy for regional nationalism on the one hand from sincere opposition to women’s emancipation on the other since the Tatars’ conception of inclusivist nationalism was inseparable from their role as Jadids, nevertheless, in another sense an important point is involved, for if it is accepted that the political conceptions of the Jadids were sufficiently similar to those of the conservatives that cooperation was possible in 1917 (and their agreements on

⁵⁸ This earlier congress should not be confused with the Congress of the Peoples of the East held at Baku in September 1920.

⁵⁹ Zenkovskiy, p. 151; Rorlich, p. 128. Had delegates from the Caucasus and Central Asia attended subsequent congresses, a counter-resolution stood a good chance of passing.

⁶⁰ See Pipes, p. 76; Zenkovsky, p. 150; Rorlich, p. 128.

other topics indicate that this was so), then one may suppose that should the Tatars subsequently downplay efforts to promote social reform among Russia's Muslims, a trend towards political unity might again become feasible. This in fact happened in 1919 and 1920. The true significance of the May Congress, therefore, was not that it signaled a victory of territorial nationalists over extraterritorial nationalists; rather it represented a rejection of reformist pan-Muslims by conservative pan-Muslims. The political sympathy of most of the delegates remained at all times with the unity of Islam and the Muslim Ummah.

Little evidence of preference for regionalism per se can be found among Russia's Muslims in 1917. Indeed, the defeat of the Tatars' conception of nationalism was perceived by the Tatars themselves to be due to a deep social conservatism among their colleagues and not to any sympathy for secular or regional nationalism. This perception that social rather than political factors had caused the split was directly responsible for the growth of a radical Left among the Tatars. In the autumn of 1917 this Left grew rapidly as numerous Tatars began to perceive in socialism an ally in their struggle to modernize Russia's conservative Muslims. At first most Tatar socialists were Mensheviks or SRs, since these parties had endorsed extraterritorial autonomy and peasant ownership of the land, respectively.⁶¹ But by 1918 the Bolshevik element overtook the Menshevik and SR elements. One reason for this fact was the prestige brought by Bolshevik victory in the struggle for power. A second reason was the essentially democratic nature of the Party in 1918. It is important to recall that the centralization trend in Soviet politics, which ultimately resulted in Stalin's dictatorship, only became apparent in 1919. The rapid growth of the RSDLP(b) in 1917 had imparted a distinctly egalitarian and democratic flavor to its procedures⁶² (which is not to say that the Bolsheviks were ever interested in sharing power with non-Bolsheviks), and, even though the Central Committee in 1918 was already seeking to re-impose the pre-war authoritarian "democratic centralism," for most of 1918 it was still possible for minority nationalists within its

⁶¹ Pipes, p. 156.

⁶² See Rabinowitch, A., *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* (NY: Norton, 1976).