

# The Muslim October

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The October revolution is not a Russian revolution. It can more correctly be characterised as an unfinished world revolution. We have tried to explain this on other occasions.<sup>1</sup> This article will deal only with one aspect of this question, perhaps even a minor one, which is nonetheless of capital importance for the world of Islam, for those parts of the world where Muslims constitute a majority or (as in India) a sizeable minority of society. But before going into the specific topic of the article, it would be in order to briefly elaborate in more general terms why the October revolution is not solely a Russian revolution.

It is significant to note how the two foremost leaders of the revolution, Lenin and Trotsky, characterised the impending revolution as soon as they set foot in revolutionary Russia with a time lag of one month. When Lenin arrived from Switzerland in early April at the Finland Station in what was then Petrograd, he addressed a crowd of workers mobilised by the Bolsheviks to welcome the leader of the party. He ended a typically brief and to the point speech with the slogan: “Long live the world socialist revolution!” Trotsky, on the other hand, having been deported to

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<sup>1</sup> We have done so in writing only in Turkish. See our “80 yıla bedel 8 ay: Büyük Ekim Devrimi”, (“8 months worth 80 years: The Great October Revolution”), *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 32-33, Autumn-Winter 2017.

the United States by the French and subsequently the Spanish governments during the war, had a much longer route to traverse and, having been held captive en route by the British for a while, only arrived in Petrograd in early May. The first thing he did was to participate in a meeting of the Petrograd Soviet. As president of the same soviet in 1905, he was immediately given the floor as a guest of honour. It was impossible for him to know how Lenin had ended his welcoming speech a month before. Trotsky concluded with the following line: “Long live the Russian revolution, prelude to the world socialist revolution!” Those long accustomed to the wholly false idea that “world revolution” is a Trotskyist concept may be aggrieved to see that, if anything, Lenin was more “Trotskyist” than Trotsky himself! However that may be, there is no denying that the two revolutionaries that were going to play the decisive part as leaders of the coming October revolution manifestly concurred in considering the future taking of power by the Russian proletariat as the anti-chamber of world revolution. This was no coincidence: for both leaders, this was **the only possible programme** that could be put forth by anyone standing firmly on the ground of revolutionary Marxism.<sup>2</sup>

Hence the October revolution, which was very closely associated with the Bolshevik leadership, was expressly carried out to bring about a world revolution, not a locally delimited revolution confined to the territory and the peoples of a single country, albeit the largest one in the world in geographical terms. This alone is sufficient reason to refrain from using the epithet “Russian revolution” for what occurred during and in the wake of the October revolution. It is, of course, true that in the narrowest sense the revolution was a palpably Russian event. Witness, for instance, the fact that even Trotsky himself titled his monumental historical account *The History of the Russian Revolution*. But we should remember that the subject matter of the *History* was the analysis of the events that culminated in the taking of power on 25<sup>th</sup> October 1917 by the Russian proletariat, supported by the peasantry. **That**, undeniably, is the Russian revolution. However, when we speak retrospectively of the October revolution, this is not the only thing that we mean: the October revolution as a phenomenon of historic significance can only be fully assessed with the entire gamut of consequences that flowed from that event. And that is what makes the October revolution an unfinished world revolution.

What did happen as a sequel is a world revolution in more than one sense. For

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<sup>2</sup> I cite these two incidents obviously not as conclusive evidence for this idea, but only as a colourful symptom. For a collection of endless quotations from Lenin in this respect one can consult Appendix II, titled, “Socialism in a Separate Country?”, of Trotsky’s *The History of the Russian Revolution* (London: Pluto Press, 1979, pp. 1219-1257). There is no need to cite the same evidence for Trotsky as Stalinist mythology has only cast doubt on Lenin’s attitude on this question, claiming, on the basis of extremely flimsy evidence, that Lenin believed that class society could be done away within a single country.

one thing, the “Russian revolution” in the strict sense of the term had an electrifying impact on the rest of the world. Revolutions erupted in Germany and Austria-Hungary, resulting in short-lived Soviet republics in Bavaria and Hungary. There was also a revolution in Finland that was defeated, as well as quasi-revolutionary movements in the industrial heartland of Italy and in Scotland. This was immediately followed by revolutions in the Middle East, through a succession of insurrections in Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Palestine, as well as one in distant Morocco. These remained limited to an anti-colonial, anti-imperialist programme, but their affinity to the Russian revolution is manifest.<sup>3</sup> The revolution then moved further to the east to reach China, with proletarian insurrections in the industrially developed regions of the country, crushed as a result of the disastrous policy of the rising Stalinist leadership of the Comintern.<sup>4</sup> The last gape of this round of world revolution was in Spain, a rising of the proletariat and the poor peasantry of that country with tremendous potentialities that was drowned wilfully in blood by the Stalinist bureaucracy.<sup>5</sup>

The second sense in which the Russian revolution was of universal import pertains to the fact that both the capture of power and the new socio-economic structures that sprang into being as a result had much more than was specifically Russian about them: they had everything to do with **a showdown on the scale of a country between the two constitutionally international fundamental classes of modern capitalist society**. This was the first experiment in abolishing capitalist private property and the establishment of a planned economy on the basis of public property. All this had universal significance for humanity at large, by no means confined to the frontiers of Russia alone. So did the state form established by the first instance of proletarian dictatorship (leaving aside the ephemeral existence of the Paris Commune): the name and the structure of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the brain child of that accomplished defender of the rights of oppressed nations, Lenin, is immensely significant in the sense that it bears no reference to any geographic territory, let alone a nation, and is, thereby, the kernel of the future world federation that is the necessary transit point to a stateless society in the future. Thus was born a new epoch in the development of revolutions: **the age of proletarian revolutions** increasingly replacing the epoch of bourgeois revolutions.

Further, this state as well the society that accompanied it, born of the October revolution, became a powerful actor on the world stage that left its imprint on de-

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3 See my article “Revolution as the driving force of modern Middle Eastern history” in this issue of *Revolutionary Marxism*.

4 See the voluminous writings of Trotsky on China in this period. There are many different collections, among which *Leon Trotsky on China*, Les Evans and Russell Block (eds.), New York: Monad Press, 1976.

5 See Pierre Broué/Emile Témime, *La révolution et la guerre d'Espagne*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1961.

cisive aspects of the evolution of the totality of human affairs not only briefly but throughout the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century or, to be more precise, for three quarters of a century, until the demise of the USSR in 1991. Not a single aspect of socio-economic, political or ideological processes throughout the entire world would have been the same had the October revolution not taken place. To put it more forcefully, the October revolution had a **decisive** impact on other revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that ended up abolishing capitalism, on the defeat of the scourge that befell humanity in mid-century called fascism, on the anti-colonial struggle and the practically complete demise of the odious colonial system established by capitalism, and even on the so-called welfare state in the imperialist heartlands of capitalism, in ways which would take us too long to discuss here.<sup>6</sup>

We finally come to the seemingly much less important reason why the October revolution is not exclusively a Russian revolution. To understand this, one would do well to remember that the Soviet Union, that “nation-less” state form, so to speak, comprised at least six republics, in Transcaucasia and Central Asia, the autochthonous population of which was Muslim in its majority before the revolution (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan). Add to this the peoples inside Russia proper, such as the Tatars, the Bahskir, the Kalmuk, the Chechens, the Dagestani etc. and one will come to realise that these peoples, some of whom had been conquered only several decades before the October revolution, not only could in no sense be considered “Russian” in the strict sense of the term, but were also different from all the other non-Russian peoples of the Western borderlands (Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, the Baltic states etc.) and of Transcaucasia (Georgia and Armenia) regarding their historical background, cultural and ideological formation, mores and lifestyles, and even the development of socio-economic relations and class structure (of which more below). The October revolution was also a revolution of Muslim peoples!

And this has world-historic significance. It is one thing to say that October was not only Russian but also Georgian and Armenian and a completely different thing to say that October was also a revolution of Muslim peoples. To put it bluntly, received opinion nowadays regards Muslim peoples not capable of acceding to the wonderful world of modernity because of the antiquated, even hopelessly bigoted, nature of their religion (whereas, presumably, Judaism and Christianity are wonderfully progressive religions). The fact that a socialist revolution was joined by Muslim peoples over a vast expanse of territory extending all the way from the Volga to the Chinese frontier of the Soviet Union is a gauntlet thrown on the face of such narrow-minded and prejudiced views of an entire population. And when one

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<sup>6</sup> Our article in Turkish discusses these questions at length (see footnote 1).

remembers that the entire Muslim population of the planet exceeds a billion souls, on the most conservative estimate, then choosing one or the other view of these people makes an immense difference for the prospects of world socialism.

The trajectory of Muslims in the course of the October revolution sheds light on this question. This is an aspect of the October revolution that has been neglected in its significance. We intend to bring this aspect to the fore in this article.

## The national policy of the Bolsheviks

We should start out by observing that, after their initial victory in the centres where they have proven to be strongest, revolutions spread or are blocked in their development through very complex and variegated factors, among which questions of nationality and faith play a decisive part. This is all the more true if the direction in which the revolution promises to spread brings together societies that possess radically different socio-economic and class structures, which was the case of the different regions of the Russian empire. The October revolution obviously originated in the industrial heartlands of Tsarist Russia, first and foremost Petrograd and Moscow, and only spread to the borderlands later. I will assume here, for obvious reasons, that when we speak of the October revolution as a political and military event, this extends between the taking of power by the Bolsheviks and the soviets all the way to, at least, the formation of the USSR at the end of 1922.<sup>7</sup> In this aspect, the spread of the October revolution depended heavily on matters of national and religious difference. Hence Bolshevik policy on this question of nationality and faith forms the background to everything that happened throughout this period.

It is no secret that Tsarist Russia was a “prison house of peoples”. Great Russian (as opposed to Ukrainian and Belarus) chauvinism was rampant. This is why Lenin was adamant, through thick and thin, on the principle of self-determination as the ultimate guarantee for equality among nations. One cannot exaggerate the importance of this attitude, not only for the peaceable fusion of nations in the future socialist commonwealth, i.e. the world socialist federation, an aspect of paramount importance for Lenin,<sup>8</sup> but also for its immediate democratic import: in a world of

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<sup>7</sup> This is obviously also the opinion of the most eminent historian of the revolution, Edward Hallett Carr. The first instalment of his monumental *A History of Soviet Russia* (which itself extends from 1917 all the way to 1929) covers the period 1917-1923. This is not, or not exclusively, because these dates correspond to Lenin’s presence as the overpowering personality within the leadership. They also stand for the years of the revolution in its wider meaning. Witness the title of the first instalment: *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923* (which, in its turn, is incidentally divided into three tomes covering, respectively, domestic affairs, the economic sphere, and international relations).

<sup>8</sup> The national question is too often confined to a “bourgeois democratic” task. Not so in Lenin. For him the question of self-determination is, even more importantly, related to the success of the future integration and fusion of peoples in the socialist commonwealth. We have discussed this question at length in Turkish. See our *Kod Adı Küreselleşme. 21 Yüzyılda Emperyalizm*, (Code Name Globalisation: Imperialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century), Istanbul: Yordam Kitap, 2<sup>nd</sup> printing, 2008, pp. 315-346.

unequal status and power for nations, such a radical attitude on the national question is as important to establish democratic relations in society as what are usually regarded as decisive such as the freedom of expression or “free” elections. It is this policy that prepared the ground for the spread of the socialist revolution to climes where one would not have expected to see one under other circumstances. So let us now pass to a summary discussion of this policy.

It is a well-known fact that on the national question, two of the most important revolutionary Marxists of the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century clashed constantly. Rosa Luxemburg untiringly opposed Lenin’s policy of national self-determination on many grounds, the decisive one probably being that the integration of nations into the world market made obsolete for all practical purposes aspirations to nationhood. During World War I, others within the Marxist movement picked up this thread, arguing for the impossibility of solving any political question except at world level in the imperialist epoch, a position labelled “imperialist economism” by Lenin and castigated for its absolute determinism and reductionism.<sup>9</sup> After the war, during the 1919 congress of what now was becoming the Russian Communist Party, a congress where a new programme was adopted, the national question set Lenin against Bukharin and Pyatakov pretty much along the lines of the earlier debate between Lenin and Rosa.<sup>10</sup> Lenin won over the majority of the party to his position, thus overcoming this vein of abstract internationalism.<sup>11</sup> The policies pursued by the new Soviet government thus bore the mark of Lenin’s approach to the national question throughout the decisive period of 1917-1922.

The February revolution had already electrified the Muslim communities of Russia. May Day 1917 saw the First All Russia Congress of Muslims gather approximately 900 delegates from around the country. A second such congress would convene in Kazan, capital city of Tatarstan in the Volga region, in July and August. There were other, more local initiatives throughout 1917. These were just the beginnings, with the bourgeois-democratic element largely dominating the minority socialist-communist current.

In the wake of the October revolution, the new government, Sovnarkom, published two successive declarations in the course of the month of November 1917.

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9 See his “A Caricature of Marxism and Imperialist Economism” (1916) in *Collected Works*, volume 23, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, pp. 28-76.

10 For Lenin’s views on the national question, the most important texts date from the world war period: see “The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination. Theses” (1916), *Collected Works*, op. cit, volume 22, pp. 143-156 and “The Discussion on Self-Determination Summed Up”, *ibid*, pp. 320-360.

11 See E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923*, volume 1, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971, pp. 274-76, for details of the provisions on the national question in the new programme adopted at the 1919 congress.

The first was a general one titled “Declaration on the Rights of the Peoples of Russia”, while the second was specifically addressed “To the Muslim Toilers of Russia and the East”, which recognised the right of Muslim peoples to live according to their own mores and traditions. Then came, in January 1918, the “Declaration on the Rights of the Toiling and Exploited People”. All this culminated in the setting up of a Central Muslim Commissariat, abbreviated “Muscom”, in addition to the Commissariat for National Affairs already established on the heels of the October revolution, headed by Stalin. It was Muslim revolutionaries that were appointed to head Muscom.

In certain parts of Russia, in particular in what was then called Turkestan in Central Asia, Bolshevism was hijacked by the Russian element, including the colonisers in person. These opportunistically passed over to the victorious Bolshevik side in order to sustain their interests. There were bureaucrats and merchants and well-to-do farmers (*kulaks*), and even Orthodox priests, alongside the less surprising railroad and other workers among those newly coming over to Bolshevism. Thus Central Asian Bolshevism was markedly colonial in its composition.

The central Soviet authorities did not yield to this *fait accompli*, but rather tried to redress the wrongdoing of Russian settlers against the indigenous Muslim population. They warned the Russian element that ruled in the name of Bolshevism against discrimination vis-a-vis the Muslim population. In October 1919, the Executive Committee of the All Russia Soviet (VTsIK) and Sovnarkom published a joint resolution that addressed the issue of Turkestan. This included the following crystal clear passage:

The self-determination of the peoples of Turkestan and the abolition of all national inequality and all privileges of one national group over another constitute the foundation of all the policy of the Soviet government of Russia and serve as a guiding principle in all the work of its organs... It is only through such work that the mistrust of the native toiling masses of Turkestan for the workers and peasants of Russia, bred by many years' domination of Russian Tsarism, can be finally overcome.<sup>12</sup>

Not contenting himself with the formal decrees and instructions put out by the soviet and the government, Lenin penned a letter to the communists of Turkestan, in his capacity not of the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars (the counterpart of Prime Minister), but as a party member, taking them to task for discrimination against the indigenous population and entreating them to behave themselves. For Lenin it was “no exaggeration to say that the establishment of proper relations

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12 Cited in Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, v. 1, op. cit., p. 339.

with the peoples of Turkestan [was] now of immense, **epochal importance** for the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic.” He then urged them

to devote the closest to this question, to exert every effort to set an effective example of comradely relations with the peoples of Turkestan, to demonstrate to them by your actions that we are sincere in our desire to wipe out all traces of Great-Russian imperialism and wage an implacable struggle against world imperialism, headed by British imperialism.<sup>13</sup>

The “epochal importance” and the last point about “world imperialism” are suggestive of something that surpasses the domestic relations between nations. For Lenin the relevance of this was not confined to the question of relations within the new Soviet system. Important as that was, the attitude meted out to the local population was also significant in that it would have repercussions for the reputation of the new Soviet state in the eyes of the colonial world at large. This is how Lenin put the question in a letter written to Adolf Joffe, a Central Committee member of the party, on a later occasion, in September 1921:

I have strong suspicions regarding the “Tomsky line”... of relaying Greta-Russian chauvinism or, more precisely, of being tilted in that direction. For our entire Weltpolitik, it is devilishly important to win the confidence of the indigenous population and to win it three or four times, to prove to them that we are not imperialists, that we will not display any deviation in that direction. This is a **worldwide** question and I am not exaggerating, worldwide. One has to be extremely rigorous on this question. It will have repercussions in India, in the East.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to note that on the question of respect and recognition for the Muslim peoples Lenin and Trotsky were of one mind (of which more later). The two foremost leaders of the October revolution were also in agreement on the necessity of a sensitive attitude to Muslim institutions. The Bolsheviks displayed a startling flexibility on this question. On the basis of the recognition of the Muslim peoples as the oppressed nations of Russia, they conceded a considerable space to institutions proper to Muslim society. This included, at its most extreme, a dual court system, with Sharia courts existing side by side with the regular Soviet system in matters arising in the area of civil law.<sup>15</sup>

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13 “To the Communists of Turkestan”, *Collected Works*, v. 30, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977, p. 138, emphasis added.

14 Pierre Broué, *L’histoire de l’Internationale Communiste 1919-1943*, Paris: Fayard, 1997, p. 269, emphasis added.

15 See Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014, pp. 60-62; Dave Crouch, “The Bolsheviks and Islam”, *International Socialism*, 2:110, Spring 2006.



Another important aspect of Bolshevik policy was the policy of wilfully and systematically developing local communist cadres so as to turn over the administration of local affairs to the leaders of the indigenous population. This was labelled *korenizatsiya* (indigenisation). Every union republic, autonomous republic and autonomous region was to be led by the local population in its quest to move towards a socialist society.

*Korenizatsiya* also implied that the local units were given the right to use their own language, develop their own historical culture, and educate the younger generations without undue interference from central authorities. In diametrical opposition to the cultural policy of many a young bourgeois republic, which usually repressed the cultural heritage of local populations, gave status of monopoly to the language and culture of the dominant nationality, ironed out differences and tried to impose uniformity in matters of language and culture, the Soviet state encouraged the rediscovery of past tradition and culture, created a living space for every nation and nationality, supported languages the use of which was even prohibited in other regional states, as was the case of Kurdish, and saw to it that all kinds of national and local culture flourished, all this with a view to reverse the Great Russian chauvinism of Tsarist Russia and to establish a real, and not only formal, equality among the nations that formed the new Soviet state. Historian of the national question in the Soviet Union, H el ene Carr ere d'Encausse, not remarkably sympathetic to communism, characterises this policy as "the most original and **fascinating** aspect of the Soviet policy of this period" and the 1920s overall as a "revolutionary utopia" from this point of view.<sup>16</sup>

Another element of the Bolshevik approach to the national question under the new Soviet state was federalism. This was entirely novel. Lenin was decidedly against federalism or other kinds of decentralised administration before the revolution. This stance derived from the Marxist view that the greater the integrated economic space and the closer the coordination in decision-making, the more efficient the socialist planning of the economy would be *mutatis mutandis*. Lenin's attitude towards self-determination was of an "all or nothing" kind of approach. If a nation decided it would secede, proletarian socialism was duty-bound to recognise this as a right. If, on the other hand, the decision was to remain within the existing setup, then there was no longer room for negotiating the degree of centralisation within the common state. Centralisation there had to be. Lenin swiftly changed his attitude after the revolution. Having come to realise that Great Russian chauvinism was difficult to extirpate from the minds of even communist cadres, his adorable instinct of recognising a mistaken idea led to his

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<sup>16</sup> See the discussion of this policy in her *L'Empire  clat e*, Paris: Flammarion, 1978, pp. 24-29 (the quotations are from p. 26, emphasis added).

acceptance of the federal principle as a more flexible and adaptable form that would cater to the dual requirements of unity and equality.

His last political victory is, in fact, the establishment of the USSR as a federal union among equal nations.<sup>17</sup> While fighting different manifestations of Great Russian chauvinism, not only towards Muslim peoples but also others, and in particular in the context of Georgia, he came more and more openly into conflict with the Commissar for National Affairs, Stalin, and his cohort. He became keenly aware of the problem of disregard for full equality among Soviet nations as one of the aspects of the rising bureaucratisation of the Soviet state. In the context of the so-called debate of “autonomisation”,<sup>18</sup> he fought against the conception of Stalin for the new union, which was predicated on the autonomous adherence of the new soviet republics in Transcaucasia, in the western and eastern borderlands and in Central Asia to the Russian Federative Soviet Socialist Republic. His own solution, ingenious in its farsightedness, was what we have known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. This appellation is singularly progressive in the relationship it establishes among the nations of the federal state, in that it contains, as we have already pointed out, no reference to any component nation or even to a geographic area. It is unique in modern history for lack of a national denomination. Thanks to the genius of Lenin, the first socialist state was, despite the coexistence of around 200 ethnic and national groups inside the new state, was “nation-less” in its façade to the rest of the world. This was a Union that could, without prejudice to any national qualms, grow further and further as revolutions triumphed in other parts of the world to finally end up as the world socialist federation.

Such was the overall structure of the policy that proved to be so accommodating to the nations formerly oppressed by the Tsarist state, in particular to Muslim peoples.

### **Diverse social structures, different paths**

We can now move to an account of how the Muslim peoples of the former Tsarist territories tied their fate to the new state born of the October revolution. The first aspect to note as we move into this domain is that these Muslim peoples came

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17 See Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle*, Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2005, and the collection of documents and Lenin's writings brought together in *Lenin's Final Fight*, George Fyson (ed.), New York: Pathfinder Press, 2010.

18 See Lenin's own take on this question in “The Question of Nationalities or ‘Autonomisation’” and “The Question of Nationalities or ‘Autonomisation’ (*Continued*)”, *Collected Works*, v. 36, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971, pp. 605-611. This text was for long decades censored in the Soviet Union under Stalin and only published in the 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of Lenin's *Collected Works* after Stalin's death.

to join the new Soviet state through different paths. This was in the nature of things for these peoples lived under a wide array of modes of production and hence under different class structures, had different relationships to the Great Russian oppressor nation and were thus affected quite diversely by the revolutionary process of 1917. There is also the fact that the revolution found these different peoples at different levels of the development of the bourgeois-democratic and the socialist-communist movements, depending not only on their social development, but their geographic location as well.

With regard to the latter, it should be pointed out that the Muslims of Russia lived in three distinct geographic regions. The first was inner Russia, the Volga region and the eastern borderlands, including the mountainous areas of northern Caucasus. There were, then, the Muslims of Transcaucasia, those Muslim peoples living in the south of the Caucasian mountains, in what is today Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. There was finally the vast expanse of land extending from the Caspian Sea to the Chinese border, generally known as Central Asia but sometimes also called Inner Asia.

However, these three regions were not necessarily internally homogeneous with respect to their social and political level of development. Overall, there were four different socio-economic structures to be found in the Muslim world of Russia. There was first the specific case of the Volga Tatars.<sup>19</sup> This was a society where commercial capitalism had advanced quite far, with some accumulation even of local industrial capital. There was a very advanced commercial bourgeoisie, playing a role akin to the one played by the Jews and Armenians in long-distance trading within the Russian empire, with a corresponding diaspora in different cities, which formed the basis of merchant activities. The Tatars acted as the agents of Russian interests among other Turkic peoples, in particular in Central Asia, until that area was finally militarily conquered in the decades of the 1860s and the 1870s. From then on, Russian merchants had no longer need of the services of the Tatar tradesmen. This resulted in a swift awakening of national consciousness in Tatar society.<sup>20</sup> The *Jadid* (renewal) movement developed a kind of interpretation of Islam that was accommodating for the rising bourgeois society and the economic imperatives of capitalism. In late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Jadidism and its Tatar ideologues, such as Gasprinski and Akçura, had a profound impact on the birth of a Turkish nationalism and a bourgeois-democratic movement in other Turkic Muslim societies (see below), including the Ottoman Empire. Hence the revolution, from February

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<sup>19</sup> As distinct from the Tatars of Crimea on the Black sea coast, a community that was at a much earlier stage of development.

<sup>20</sup> Osman Tiftikçi, *İslamcılığın Doğuşu* (The birth of Islamism), Istanbul: Akademi, 2011, pp. 27-29.

on, found a very advanced bourgeois-democratic movement among the Tatars of the Volga region. There were even the first beginnings of a social democratic movement before the revolution. Two short-lived socialist parties had been formed in the heat of the 1905 revolution. Then Mirseyit Sultangaliev, a prominent future communist leader among the Muslim population of Russia, established what was called the Combat Organisation of Tatar Socialists in 1913.<sup>21</sup> However, socialism became an effective force among the Tatars only after the February revolution, as we shall see further on.

In a kind of complementary opposition to Volga Tatar society stood Azerbaijan in Transcaucasia. Here it was not the bourgeoisie, as in the Tatar case, that was advanced, but the proletariat. The presence of this class was decisive especially in Baku, today the capital of Azerbaijan, deriving from the simple fact that this region had vast reserves of oil discovered very early on. The autochthonous bourgeoisie, on the other hand, was relatively speaking less developed, since oil companies were run by foreigners and Russians. On the other hand, both within the bourgeoisie and the oil proletariat, the dominant indigenous element was the Armenians. Transcaucasia in early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a mixed bag of different peoples living together. It was only through the developments of the new century that more homogeneous nation-states were built in the form of Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. Yet although the proletariat was Armenian, social democracy took hold within the Muslim population as well. This movement was even more advanced here than in Volga Tatar society when the hour of the revolution struck.

There was next the inheritors of a medieval sedentary and urban civilisation in what was then called Turkestan (now divided between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) in Central Asia, where capitalism has penetrated to a much lower level than in either Tatar society or Transcaucasia. Tashkent, Bokhara, Hiva (or Hworezm), Samarkand, Kokand, and other cities and their hinterland were ruled by khans and emirs. The sedentary society of Turkestan was early enough brought under the influence of Jadidism.<sup>22</sup> Tatar Jadidism was here combined with the influence of the Ottoman revolution of 1908, a multinational and truly popular revolution, led by the so-called Young Turk movement of the Committee of Union and Progress.<sup>23</sup> The result of this cross-pollination was the Young Bokhara movement (an obvious reference to its Young Turk namesake), which was to play a prominent part in the events that unfolded in this region after the October revolution. As opposed to this quite advanced bourgeois-democratic movement, there was almost no trace of a

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21 Hamit Erdem, *Mustafa Suphi*, Enlarged 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Istanbul: Sel Yayıncılık, 2010, p. 74.

22 Tiftikçi, *İslamcılık*, op. cit., pp. 31-32.

23 See Sungur Savran, "The Heritage of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century", in *The Politics of Permanent Crisis*, N. Balkan/S. Savran (eds.), New York: Nova, 2002, pp. 5-6.

socialist or communist movement in Turkestan and anything that did appear was, as we have already seen, Russian and not autochthonous in the true sense of the term.

Finally, there was the pastoral society of nomadic tribes. These tribes had communal property over their pastures and meadows. But in certain regions, in particular today's Kazakhstan (the Kazakhs were called "Kyrgyz" by the Russians at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>24</sup>), Russian settlers grabbed land from these tribes to set up farms, which led to perhaps the most decisive social conflict of that period in Kazakh society, pitting Kazakhs in their entirety against the figure of the Russian settler. This kind of nomadic tribal society was also present in the eastern end of Central Asia, in what is today's Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (the latter being the only Persian speaking people of Central Asia of a sizeable population), although evidence for this type of conflict between the pastoral tribe and the Russian settler was evidently much less conspicuous. One point of considerable importance is that for these nomadic populations, Islam was much less of a guiding influence than it was in the sedentary, urban societies of Tatarstan, Azerbaijan and Turkestan. There were also the mountain people of northern Caucasia, i.e. the part of Caucasia inside what is today the Russian Federation as opposed to Transcaucasia in the south, with a diverse ethnic background (the Chechens, the Ingush, the Abkhaz etc. as well as the Turkic nomad tribes). Overall in nomadic tribal society, socialism or communism had had practically no chance to develop before the revolutionary year 1917.

Given these divergent socio-economic and class structures and the accompanying ideological and political development of the different societies in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup>, these different societies came to join the revolutionary maelstrom after the October revolution in sometimes totally different ways. But before going into those different paths we should very briefly dwell on a most significant but almost universally ignored social event in pre-revolutionary Russia.

### **The forgotten insurrection**

It very often happens that Western historiography, with its strong bias towards Judeo-Christian society, culminating in the bourgeois society of Western Europe and later North America, disregards even some of the most important events that unfold in societies that fall outside of the orbit of its own culture of preference. Consider the following fact: alongside the mutinies in the various armies and the navies of the nations that fought out World War I,<sup>25</sup> the only serious instance of social unrest on the home front all over the Eurasian continent before the February

24 See Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, v. 1, op. cit., p. 321n. Incidentally Azerbaijan Muslims, commonly known as Azeris today, were called Tatars at that time.

25 See Broué, *L'Internationale Communiste*, op. cit., pp. 39-41.

revolution is still considered to be the Easter rebellion of the Irish in 1916, which led ultimately to the formation of the Republic of Ireland as a separate entity from Great Britain.

There is not the slightest doubt that both the mutinies in the military and the Easter rebellion are of great import for the subsequent unfolding of the war. But it is almost incredible that hardly any general history of the war or, for that matter, of the October revolution, mentions, so much as in passing, the immensely extensive 1916 revolt in Central Asia. This was a social uprising of millions of people suppressed cruelly by the Tsar's armies. The number of people participating in the revolt is counted in the millions.<sup>26</sup> The number of casualties, a variegated sum of different kinds of elimination, indigenous people massacred by the Tsar's forces, the much smaller number of Russian settlers killed by the rebels, and the very high number of (mostly Kyrgyz) men, women and children who perished trying to cross over into China over unyielding mountain passes are, for their part, counted between 200 to 300 thousand souls. There can be no doubt that a revolt and a tragedy on this scale must have had a terrible impact on the fighting power of Tsarist Russia and contributed to the October revolution both directly and in roundabout ways. This historic event is waiting to be resuscitated, after the long silence it has had to endure for many a decade.<sup>27</sup>

The immediate cause of the revolt was the decision by the government to conscript Central Asian subjects of the Tsar to the war effort. Because there was no confidence in these populations, they were regimented in unarmed labour battalions, in strikingly similar fashion to what the Ottoman government did with its Armenian subjects (the infamous "*amele taburları*"<sup>28</sup>). This led to a very extensive rebellion on the part of the locals. However, the fact that the revolt was not exclusively against conscription *per se*, but Russian colonialism across the board is demonstrated by the fact that at the outset of the revolt, Russian settler farmers were killed in a rampage by the rebels. Let the following judgment be tentative since the incident

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26 Adeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism*, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

27 It is to the pride of the Bolshevik rule of the early 1920s before the bureaucratic onslaught that the 1916 revolt and its brutal suppression were unflinchingly scrutinised by early Russian Marxist historiography as a shameful episode in the process of Russian colonisation of the Muslim peoples of Central Asia. This honest attitude apparently changed as Great Russian nationalism took hold of Soviet society as a result of the progressive bureaucratisation of party and state. See Alexander Morrison, "Central Asia: Interpreting and Remembering the 1916 Revolt", <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/80931>, retrieved on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2017.

28 On the capital importance of these as a war ploy, see Sungur Savran, "Sınıf Mücadelesi Olarak Ermeni Soykırımı" (The Armenian Genocide as Class Struggle), *Devrimci Marksizm*, No. 23, Spring 2015, pp. 83-86.

has been so little studied and since we are not yet sufficiently knowledgeable to reach conclusive results, but it can probably be said that this was a perfect counterpart to the Irish Easter rebellion in the westernmost part of Great Britain arising in the easternmost provinces of the Tsarist ally of Great Britain!

Hence, in opposition to a stubborn prejudice regarding the submissiveness of Muslim peoples, which posits the aversion of these populations towards rebellion and insurrection and revolution, the Muslim peoples of the Russian empire were **the first** to rebel against the consequence of the massive carnage that World War I represented. There is no doubt that the tremors that resulted from this revolt contributed both to the increasing vulnerability of Russian troops at the front and to the October revolution. It also probably resulted in the peoples of Central Asia considering the new state born of the October revolution in a positive light since it was the Bolsheviks that finally put an end to that savage power structure called Tsarism. We need more research on this revolt of immense importance in order to connect the threads in more concrete fashion.

### **Muslim communism after the October revolution**

The February revolution gave an impetus to the communist movement among Muslim peoples. The first to take up the challenge were the Volga Tatars, who established, as early as April 1917 the Muslim Socialist Committee of Kazan (now capital to the Autonomous Republic of Tatarstan inside the Russian Federation). Three of the leaders were of great significance: Mollanur Vahidov (the president of the committee) would become a leading star of the Muslim communist movement until he was killed while defending Kazan against the Whites in August 1918. Aminna Muhiddinova's presence as secretary of the committee was of great symbolic value as a woman in a society where women in general were heavily oppressed. The third name is, of course, the most illustrious among Muslim communists of the period: Mirsaid Sultangaliyev rose to become the most prominent leader of the movement, but was accused of the heresy of national communism, hounded and finally executed by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1940.<sup>29</sup> The Socialist Committee attended the impressive First All Russia Congress of Muslims, convened on May Day 1917, but only as a minority, since the overriding presence there was that of Jadidism. In the wake of the October revolution, in January 1918, Vahidov was appointed the Commissar of Muslim Affairs by the Sovnarkom, with Galimcan İbrahimov and Sharif Manatov his deputies and Sultangaliyev in charge of the division of the commissariat in Kazan.

March 1918 saw the convening of the Conference of the Muslim Toilers of

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<sup>29</sup> The main source on this important historic figure is Alexandre Bennigsen/Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Sultangaliyev. Le père de la révolution tiers-mondiste*, Paris: Fayard, 1986.

Russia. With this conference, the communists were thus distinguishing themselves from the bourgeois-democratic movement within the Muslim population. This conference elected an executive of 12 members, with the purpose of establishing an independent Muslim Socialist Communist Party, which soon enough came to be labelled the Muslim Communist Party (b), in complete parallel with the Russian Communist Party (b), the “b” of course standing for “Bolshevik” lest there be any confusion with the Mensheviks. The Muslim Communist Party (b) held its first conference in June 1918 and elected a Bureau (called “Musbureau” for short). Thus, parallel to the focus on Muslim affairs in the bosom of the Soviet state (Muscom), there was a nascent Muslim communism as well (Musbureau). This movement was apparently regarded by the Bolsheviks as an incubator for Muslim communism all over Russia as well as in other countries where Muslims were either a majority or a sizeable minority, such as India. The greatest testimony to this latter aspect is the presence of Turkish communists inside this Muslim communist entity. Mustafa Suphi, the main leader of the Turkish communists inside Russia, was also a leader of this movement until his death at the hands of the Turkish bourgeoisie in 1921. This probably is at least one of the reasons why the organisation of Muslim communists was at first conceived as a party independent of the RCP (b).

However, this idea proved to be ephemeral. In September, the Muslim Communist Party was turned into a section of the RCP (b). We are not yet in possession of sufficient research into and documentation on either the reason for the initial decision of forming an independent party for Muslim communists or that for the subsequent one of abandoning this idea in such a brief lapse of time. On the other hand, the autonomy of the movement and its distinct organisational form were not abolished. The Congress of Muslim Communists convened only two months later, on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1918 in Moscow, where a great rally was also held the next day, with Zinoviev participating. A Second Congress of Muslim Communists was convened precisely one year later (November 1919) and addressed by none less than Lenin (and well as Stalin).

The organising of Muslim communists changed tack after the founding of the Communist International at year end 1919. Immediately in the wake of the establishment of Comintern, an Eastern Section, which went under the name of the International Eastern Propaganda and Executive Soviet, was formed. We see here that the appellation “Muslim” has disappeared and the umbrella for the Muslim movement subsumed under a more general label “Eastern”, obviously including the Christian elements in the region such as the Georgians and the Armenians etc. The Baku Congress of Eastern Peoples also takes the same road of including Muslim peoples within the more general concept of “Eastern”. This progression from the vision of an independent party through a Muslim section within the party of Russian



communism to the assimilation of Muslims within an overarching conception of the East is indicative of certain debates between and within the Russian and Muslim communist movements. Revolutionary Marxist historiography has to delve into this question seriously, for considerable material points to a growing unease among communists of Muslim countries and communities over this question of assimilation into larger entities.

The Communist Party of Turkey, a decisive presence in this movement early on, was finally formally established in September 1920, immediately after the Baku Congress, in the self-same city of Baku, with plenipotentiary delegates from within Turkey also present. However, as mentioned earlier, a delegation of 15 leaders of the party, headed by Mustafa Suphi himself, travelled in December 1920 to Anatolia, only to be harassed and heckled in different cities and finally to be drowned intentionally, in a tragic incident, in the Black Sea outside Trabzon on the night of 20<sup>th</sup> to 21<sup>st</sup> January 1921. Had the leadership, and in particular its beacon Mustafa Suphi, of the Communist Party of Turkey not been eliminated by the forces of the Turkish bourgeoisie, it would be worthwhile to ask, what would have happened to the relations between the Russian and Muslim elements is an undecided question. This is particularly true of the alleged Muslim nationalist bias of Sultangaliev. Since Mustafa Suphi was a Leninist of the first order, it would have been interesting to see what his position would have been in the confrontation between Stalin and Sultangaliev.

### **The Sovietisation of Muslim Russia: the Tatars and the Bashkir**

This development of the Muslim communist movement, in addition to the Bolsheviks' policy on the national question, led, in successive stages to the spread of communism into the Muslim regions of what was formerly the Russian empire and ended up with the establishment of Soviet Socialist Republics (either union republics or autonomous republics in the Russian federation, hereafter SSR's) over several years after the October revolution. As we have already suggested, the difference in socio-economic structures and pre-revolutionary political developments in the diverse regions led to a differentiated type of transition in concrete cases towards the Soviet state. It would be useful to identify the various sources of this transition and the differences in the constellation of forces since this would teach us lessons for the future dissemination of revolutionary regimes in times of revolutionary upheaval.

One route was the establishment by the central state of SSR's in agreement with the local forces. The earliest instance of this, an impressive show of good will by the new government born of the October revolution, was the proclamation of the Tatar-Bashkir Soviet Republic as early as March 1918, that is, only four months

after the revolution. This was a clear recognition of the right of Muslim peoples to self-government, in complete contrast to the outlook dominant under Tsarist rule. Yet this republic was in a certain sense stillborn, not due to any fault of the Soviet government, but because of frictions existing between the two component nations of this newly-born political entity. The Bashkir, less advanced and more tribal than the Tatars, were suspicious of the supremacy of the latter within a common political entity and decided to stay aloof to the new republic. It was under a nationalist figure, Zeki Validov, that a majority of Bashkir threw their lot with the white army of Kolchak. However, here we come across one of the decisive factors in the choice made by the Muslim and Turkic peoples of the former empire of the Tsar: Kolchak, as well as other commanders among the Whites, were ruthless defenders of Great Russian chauvinism and did not intend to grant the slightest concession to the oppressed nations of Russia. This stood in stark contrast to Lenin's policy. Hence, with his six thousand troops, Validov defected from the Whites to join the Red Army in return for the proclamation of the Autonomous Soviet Republic of Bashkortostan. Thus was born a Soviet state within the FSRSR with a counter revolutionary leader at its head! Irony of ironies!

This incident is full of lessons to be learned for future situations that may arise in revolutionary upheavals. Let us first briefly recapitulate the events. Bashkortostan was established in March 1919, a full year after the stillborn Tatar-Bashkir Autonomous Republic. However, the two sides soon fell apart over many questions, including the level of integration of Validov's forces into the Red Army, with Validov resisting integration and the central authorities obviously insisting on full integration. After much haggling and friction, Validov finally defected to the so-called *Basmachi* movement (a semi-bandit movement that fought for Muslim independence, also joined at a certain stage by the former Ottoman strongman in exile, Enver Pasha). Notwithstanding the defection of Validov, Bashkortostan remained an autonomous republic.

The first lesson to be learned is, of course, the truth of Lenin's assertion that the recognition by the proletariat of the oppressor nation of the right to self-determination for oppressed and smaller nations, far from instigating the latter to search for independence and thus fragmenting the territory of the revolution as Rosa Luxemburg, and Bukharin and Pyatakov in their turn, claimed it would, will attract those nations magnetically to the proletariat of the oppressor nation. The Bashkir case is just an extreme instance of how, even under a reactionary leadership, the oppressed nation will side with the revolutionary government if that government has a correct attitude to the national question.

The second significant aspect of this interesting episode is that, in politics, many a different kind of manoeuvre can succeed if you are in a strong, in this case a he-

gemonically superior, position. Many Bolshevik leaders protested against the pact between Lenin and Validov, pointing to the incontrovertible fact that the latter was a reactionary nationalist. This was obvious to Lenin himself. But there were two hitches here. For one thing, the other party was a nation that had been oppressed for centuries and one had to deal with it in very sensitive manner to win it over after that centuries-long brutality. In this Trotsky was totally in agreement with Lenin, following Bashkir developments closely and crossing swords with the critics of Lenin in the latter's defence on occasion. In a 1920 telegram, for instance, he asserted the following:

In determining relations with the Bashkir republic one must consider the harmful feelings in Ufa. There they openly speak of the Bashkir republic as a temporary charitable gift, which annoys the Bashkirs extremely. Preobrazhenskii spoke at the party meeting about the need to review the nationality program at the party congress and blamed the Central Committee for offering Ufa's workers as a sacrifice to its Eastern policy. The narrow-mindedness of [Ufa party leader] El'tsin, the hysteria of Artem, the philosophy of Preobrazhenskii will soon turn our Bashkir policy into its opposite.<sup>30</sup>

The other aspect of the matter is that once your party is in control of the overall situation, the other side has very little room for manoeuvre. Lenin knew this and this is precisely why Validov ended up fleeing his home base for a hopeless adventure while the Autonomous SR of Bashkortostan continued to live on.<sup>31</sup>

It has become customary to attack the Bolshevik leadership for divide-and-rule policies in the Muslim regions of Russia and in particular in Central Asia. In its truly revolutionary period, i.e. under Lenin and, on a number of questions, into the late 1920s, the Bolshevik government did not commit such a crime. The separation of the original Tatar-Bashkir Republic into two autonomous SR's is a perfect example. On the face of it, one could easily say that the Soviet government divided two peoples of very close parenthood. The truth of the matter is the contrary. It was the division between the Tatars, a more dominant nation, and the Bashkir, full of fear for their future in the face of Tatar supremacy, that led to the division and the Soviet government simply had to concede to the will of the Bashkir. Thus the earlier unified Tatar-Bashkir Republic was dissolved soon afterwards and an Autonomous

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30 Cited in Daniel E. Schafer, "Local Politics and the Birth of the Republic of Bashkortostan", in Ronald Grigor Suny/Terry Martin (eds.), *A State of Nations. Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 177. See pp. 179-180 for further similar interventions of Trotsky in Bashkir matters.

31 Validov subsequently abandoned his original country to become a famous right-wing professor of history in Germany and Turkey.

Soviet Republic of Tatarstan established in spring 1920. However, the Tatar-Bashkir contradiction is only exemplary of a wider set of contradictions between the Muslim peoples of Russia and the proposition advanced here is true for many other cases, such as the separation of Turkestan into Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Transcaucasian Federation, a project envisioned by Stalin and his cohort, was later dissolved into three different Union SSR's (Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan). This was positively progressive in its content, since the purpose of this federation was to reduce the stature of each of the three republics vis-a-vis the Russian big brother.

### **The Baku Commune and the birth of socialist Azerbaijan**

Things were more complicated in Transcaucasia because of the Armenian genocide that was perpetrated by the now totally politically degenerate Young Turk Triumvirate of Enver-Talat-Cemal (pronounced Djemal). Once the Russian army was discharged after the October revolution, the war in Eastern Anatolia turned into a free-for-all fighting between the Armenian bands, who had earlier served as officers and soldiers in the Tsar's army, and the now deeply bruised Turkish army. In an effort to benefit from the collapse of the Russian front, the Turkish army tried to advance towards Transcaucasia, where the Armenians, including those who had fled the 1915 massacre, constituted a considerable part of the population in all three countries and naturally feared for their lives. There were consequently clashes between the Armenian population and the Azerbaijani Turks. This led, in March 1918, to what has been termed the "Baku atrocities" ("*Bakû faciaları*" in Turkish) perpetrated against the Azerbaijani Turks by forces close to the Dashnak Armenian Federation, which had by now become a nationalist party quite distinct from its earlier peasant socialist roots. These left a bitter memory in the relationship between the Armenians and Turks of Transcaucasia.

However, in the same month of March, there arose in Baku what has gone down in history as the Baku Commune. This was the first Soviet regime in Transcaucasia. And although it was established in Baku, it was not an exclusively, nor even dominantly, Muslim affair. It was multinational in its setup and a coalition of different political forces. Its foremost leader was Stepan Schaumyan, the most prominent Armenian Bolshevik, a long-time friend of Lenin's and at that time also a member of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Among the other commissars that led the Commune, the role of second fiddle, so to speak, fell to Neriman Nerimanov, a Muslim Bolshevik, who may be considered the historic leader of Azerbaijani communism. Here, in the long shadow of the bloodbath of the 1915 genocide and the subsequent mutual carnage that knew no bounds in the final stage of the war, was a miraculous instance of friendly cooperation between Armenian and Turk that

only communism in its lofty internationalism could bring about. And to top it all, the Dashnak Party was a member of the coalition government, alongside the Bolsheviks and the Left Social Revolutionaries!

The Baku Commune was to survive only four short months. The unwinding of the Commune was in fact a result of the self-same Turco-Armenian animosity. Fearing the advance of Turkish-Ottoman forces, Dashnak started to advocate the idea of taking refuge under the protective umbrella of the British army, which by now was making its presence felt in Transcaucasia after Soviet Russia had withdrawn from the war and discharged its army. The Bolsheviks and the Social Revolutionaries naturally refused this option, as this would have meant taking a hostile position towards the Soviet government in Moscow, an enemy unto death for British imperialism. A fiery debate ensued with the Bolsheviks and the Social Revolutionaries losing the vote taken in the Soviet by a very narrow margin. 26 Commissars fled the city, to be shortly captured by counter revolutionary forces and brought before the firing squad. Evidence of British complicity with this summary execution is available. There is an ironic poignancy in the fact that the elimination of Schaumyan, the top Armenian Bolshevik, almost presaged in its unfolding the killing of Mustafa Suphi, the father of Turkish communism, and his 14 comrades!

After a brief interlude following the fall of the Baku Commune, the end of October saw this time the collapse of the Turkish armies as a result of the tremor of revolution in Turkey's leading ally Germany. The lapse of time from end 1918 to early 1920 was the heyday of bourgeois nationalism in Transcaucasia, under the protection of the British army. The Dashnak in Armenia, the Musavat (Equality) Party in Azerbaijan, and the Mensheviks in Georgia dominated as long as the British stayed in Transcaucasia. But immediately after the British withdrew from the region in January 1920, there was a communist uprising in Azerbaijan and, with help from the Red Army, Soviet Azerbaijan was established in April of the same year. This was the first soviet republic in a country outside of Russia proper with a Muslim majority.

## **The Sovietisation of Central Asia**

Central Asia harboured the Muslim societies within the borders of Russia that were the most difficult to win over to socialism. For one thing, the objective obstacles to be surmounted were formidable: all of Central Asia, whatever the diversity between the different societies it consisted of, was living in a pre-capitalist stage and a working-class that deserved the name was almost absent among the indigenous population. Then there was the fact that the hatred of the Russian, traditionally owing to the pillage of the land of the locals by Russian settlers and recently fanned by the brutality of the suppression of the 1916 revolt, caused the indigenous popula-

tion to disregard at first the attitude of the Bolsheviks, with their appeal to the rights of the oppressed nations. Finally, the quasi inexistence of a socialist or communist movement naturally worked against a quick rallying of the Central Asian peoples to the Bolshevik cause.

All of these adverse conditions were raised to a power under the specific circumstances in which the region found itself almost immediately after the October revolution. There were two factors at play. On the one hand, as we have already pointed out, the Russian element in Central Asia, in particular in Turkestan, opportunusatically passed over to the victorious Bolshevik side in order to sustain their interests. Thus Central Asian Bolshevism was markedly colonial in its composition. This led to a strange sort of situation where communism almost signified colonialism to the indigenous peoples.

Ironically, the locality where the first Soviet government (though not under Bolshevik hegemony yet) appeared in September 1917, in other words, before the October revolution was victorious, was Tashkent, a city usually considered at that time the capital of Turkestan. But that was an exclusively Russian affair, with no involvement of the indigenous population. When, three months later, in December 1917, Tashkent and Kokand engaged in a war with each other, the supposedly Bolshevik Tashkent stood for Russian hegemony while the Kokand counter revolutionary side represented the colonised Muslim. Because Kokand lost, Muslim forces were forced to retreat to the mountains, which then led to the eruption of the *Basmachi* movement, already mentioned above in connection to the nationalist Bashkir leader Validov.

On the other hand, a counter revolutionary insurgency by Cossacks led to an almost absolute isolation of Central Asia from the rest of Russia, thus making it impossible for the central Soviet government in Moscow to intervene in the affairs of the region for nearly two long years. This led to the consolidation of the power of the Russian element, a system of government with features of blatant discrimination against the Muslim autochthonous element. Thus the opportunusiam of the Russian colonial forces in their easily adopted new garb, Bolshevism, was only able to play itself out because Central Asia was isolated as if in laboratory conditions and thus became immune to the influence of real internationalist Bolshevism.

It was only in 1919 that, with the turnaround of the military situation, Moscow acquired the means to intervene in Central Asian affairs. A significant watershed came in the form of the so-called "Revolutionary Committee" decree regarding Kazakhstan, in June 1919, through which the Soviet central government tried to redress the wrongdoing of Russian settlers against the indigenous Muslim population. Given that the major grievance of the nomadic tribal society of Kazakhstan had long been the expropriation they suffered with respect to their communal lands at

the hand of the Russian settler and given, further, that the cutting edge of the 1916 Central Asian revolt was turned against these self-same settlers, the Kazakh decree was of epoch-making importance, far beyond the immediate practical measures it contained. Here, at last, a “Russian” power structure promised to refrain from colonial pillage of traditional Kazakh society, a move that represented a complete turnaround in central policy.

Parallel to this came the intervention in Turkestan. As explained above the Soviet government warned the Russian element that ruled in the name of Bolshevism against discrimination vis-a-vis the Muslim population and Lenin wrote a letter to the communists of Turkestan.

The Bolshevik policy of national self-abnegation from the point of view of Russian interests paid off handsomely again. In Turkestan the revolution had admitted the limits to its power by granting the Emir of Bokhara and the Khan of Hiva their sovereignty over their respective traditional territories through treaties signed in March 1918. With the turn in Bolshevik policy after the isolation of Central Asia was overcome, the Young Bokhara movement crossed very quickly over from its earlier bourgeois-democratic positions to a new revolutionary communist orientation. The alliance between this movement and the Red Army, in turn, led to the demise of the Emir of Bokhara and opened the way to the Sovietisation of Turkestan and Central Asia at large.<sup>32</sup>

## Lessons of the Muslim October

The diffusion of the October revolution to the territories of the earlier Tsarist empire where Muslims were the indigenous peoples teaches us at least three different invaluable lessons. The first is that Muslim peoples are neither full of aversion toward revolt and revolution in their religious submissiveness, nor unable to move beyond a medieval clinging to the old and traditional. In effect, it is a striking fact that Muslims, who are today belittled for not being able to climb to the level of modernity, lived under a socio-economic order that went beyond that modernity, afflicted with class conflict and congenital inequality among nations, adapting themselves to a society with at least a nominal subscription to eradication of class distinction and national oppression was the rule. This lesson obviously does not only concern the West, with its prejudices on Islam and Muslims, but also the Westernised elites and even communists of the Islamic world, who have a view of their own society closely shaped by those prejudices. It teaches the communists of the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the Islamic world of over a billion souls should definitely not be abandoned to tradition and bigotry, but actively be won to the cause of revolution.

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32 Adee Khalid, “Nationalizing the Revolution in Central Asia: The Transformation of Jadidism, 1917-1920”, in Ronald Grigor Suny/Terry Martin (eds.), *A State of Nations*, op.cit.

A second and priceless lesson is the burning importance of the Leninist nationalities policy. If socialism or communism, using these terms interchangeably in this context, is an international phenomenon that can only be created by proletarian internationalists, then filling this internationalism, as Lenin did, with the self-determination of nations is an imperative. The Soviet experience proves beyond doubt that, far from leading to a breakup of the lands where revolution has triumphed, this Leninist policy acts as a cement that rebinds together nations and nationalities that, under class society had become enemies due to inequality between nations.

Third, one has to be very clear about the sources of nascent communist movements. Some Marxists, in their internationalist zeal, denigrate and depreciate nationalism and bourgeois-democratic movements and personalities as promising antecedents to the formation of communist movements and leaders. The historical experience teaches the exact opposite. It is extremely rare that liberals should evolve to become communists, but a commonplace for bourgeois nationalists to move towards communism and become leaders of nascent communist movements. The reason is not the superiority of nationalism as an ideology over liberalism. At root, both are ideologies of the bourgeoisie. Nationalism further infests the petty-bourgeoisie, while liberalism is, to a certain extent, condemned to remain confined to upper bourgeois circles. The decisive difference, however, is not this. After all, we do not ask for petty-bourgeois leadership in the communist movement! The decisive difference lies in the imperialist nature of our epoch. Liberalism implies, by definition, deference to the imperatives of the world market and hence to the most powerful forces of that market, imperialism. Nationalism, on the other hand, may come into conflict with imperialism at a certain stage of its development, depending on the circumstances that obtain in each specific situation. That is why liberals cannot ordinarily become communists as long as they remain true to themselves while nationalists can join communism in its anti-imperialist resolution and move on to a higher stage of internationalism from that moment on.

The experience of the early communist movement in the land of the October revolution and in the surrounding territories exemplifies this clearly. Mustafa Suphi and Ethem Nejat, the chairman and general secretary respectively of the Communist Party of Turkey, had been nationalists before they became communist internationalists. The Jadidism of Tatarstan provided the environment in which the first Muslim communists of Russia flourished. The Young Bokhara movement of Turkestan turned to communism en masse under the political hegemony of Bolshevism and opened the gates for the Sovietisation of Central Asia. Let no one be a purist on questions of the genesis of the communist movement. Where we need to be purists is to struggle against all bourgeois influences, liberal, nationalist or other, once a communist movement or organisation has been formed. Then only Leninism can lead the movement forward.