

THE IMPACT OF RUSSO-SOVIET CULTURE IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Please note that this paper was originally written before the breakup of the USSR, so it reflects the pre-independence situation in Central Asia

INTRODUCTION

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is a truly multinational state, having inherited the legacy of the tsarist conquests of Eurasian territory that began in the early sixteenth century and continued up to the end of the nineteenth century. The final acquisition to the Russian Empire was the territory then known as Turkestan (meaning "Land of the Turks"). This area is now called Soviet Central Asia.

This land of deserts, steppes, valleys, and mountains is populated primarily by people of Turkic ethnicity, such as the Kazakhs, the Kirghiz, the Turkmen, and the Uzbeks. The other major group in the area, the Tajiks, are of Iranian stock. The area has a long and vibrant history: not so long ago, Samarkand, a city in Uzbekistan, celebrated its 2,500th anniversary. Over the past several millennia, the Silk Road has brought many traders to Central Asia and the area's location on the vast interior Eurasian steppe has been a continual invitation to empire-seeking armies. As a result, the native culture has been influenced by the infusion of a number of foreign elements, introduced by groups such as the Turks, the Arabs, and the Mongols. Perhaps the best example of this is the role that Islam, brought by the Arab armies in the eighth century, has played in shaping the whole Central Asian ethos. Indeed, cities such as Bukhara and Khiva, now located in Uzbekistan, were major centers of Islamic scholarship at the height of the Muslim Empire, in the ninth and tenth centuries.

The most recent foreigners to arrive on the Central Asian scene are, of course, the Russians. What impact have they had on the culture of the area? This paper will seek to answer that question, with particular attention being paid to the Soviet period, by examining three specific aspects of Central Asian culture: religion, language, and literature. In addition, the present state of ethnic relations between Central Asians and Russians will be investigated, especially in light of current demographic trends in the area.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

It will be helpful to briefly review the events which led up to the incorporation of this area into the Russian (and later the Soviet) sphere of influence. The logical place to start is with the 240 year period (from 1240 to 1480) during which the Russians lay under "the Mongol yoke." The conquering armies

contained large numbers of Central Asian Turks and, although originally pagans, the Mongol-Turkic hordes gradually converted to Islam during the course of their rule over the Russians. At the same time, the Turkic element came to predominate among the Tatars, as they were called at the time. It was at this time that the Russians began to make an association between the suffering they endured under the Tatars and the religion of Islam. The impact of these "dark ages" on the Russian psyche should not be underestimated. From this experience arose the notion that Russia's role was to defend European civilization against the Asiatic hordes. Along with economic factors, this messianic mission provided incentive for the subsequent rapid expansion of the Russian Empire into Central Asia.

The expansion of Muscovite power began under Tsar Ivan IV (1530-1584) with the fall of the Tatar stronghold of Kazan in 1552. The initial thrusts were south into the Caucasus and west into Siberia. The northern steppe region of what is now Kazakhstan was added in the eighteenth century, but most of Central Asia remained temporarily untouched. However, when Russian expansion into the Balkans was stopped by defeat in the Crimean war in the 1850's, the movement south into Turkestan began. One Western scholar has suggested several underlying attitudes which were factors in the conquest of Central Asia:

1. An instinctive drive aimed at filling the geopolitical gap created by the collapse of the Great Tatar Horde....
2. A historical spirit of *reconquista* as far as the territories once conquered by the Horde were concerned....
3. A growing feeling of the superiority of St. Petersburg Russia over all the non-Christian *inorodsty*, with their 'barbaric Asian' morals and habits.
4. A traditional anti-Turkish stand, easily translatable into anti-Islamic attitudes.
5. The perception that the relatively few people inhabiting the Asiatic areas to the east and southwest of Russia... were an easy target for control and exploitation once the area was conquered.¹

The campaign met with relatively little resistance (compared with the Caucasus, which took much longer to subjugate) and the major cities fell one after another: Chimkent in 1855, Tashkent in 1865, Bukhara (under Russian protection) in 1868, Khiva (also under Russian protection) in 1873, Kokand in 1875, and Mary in 1884, by which time the whole region was effectively under tsarist control.

This state of affairs was not to last for long. The Bolshevik Revolution of November 7, 1917 began a process that was to even further alter Central Asia. For the next three years, civil war raged throughout the fledgling Soviet state. Muslim guerrillas, called "basmachis" by the Soviets (from *basmach*, the Uzbek word for bandit) fought against the Bolsheviks throughout the 1920's. By the early 1930's, the armed opposition had been all but crushed by the Soviets. As Bolshevik power was consolidated in Central Asia, certain administrative changes took place. The former tsarist Governorate-Generals of Turkestan and the Steppe

Region became, in 1918 and 1920 respectively, the Turkestan and Kirghiz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSR's), while the vassal khanates of Bukhara and Khiva both became People's Republics in 1920, ostensibly independent, but under Soviet control.

One of the dominant influences in Central Asia at this time was Muslim National Communism. In 1917, the Council of People's Commissars had promised, among other things, "the equality and sovereignty of the nations of Russia" and "the right of the nations of Russia to freedom of self-determination, including the right to secede and form independent states."² Muslim Communists such as the Tatar Mir Said Sultan Galiev (1880-1939?) and the Uzbek Faizullah Khojaev (1896-1938) attempted to take these promises at face value. Driven by both a commitment to spread Communism in the Muslim world and the ideals of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism, they sought to bring about

... the amalgamation of the entire Soviet Muslim world into a unified Turkestan with the addition of the Middle Volga territories, Tatarstan, Bashkiria and the Turkic, Christian Chuvash Republic, the Muslim areas of North Caucasus, Azerbaijan and Daghestan. This was to be the 'Republic of Turan', whose population would have been 75 per cent Turkic and approximately 80 per cent Muslim. It was to have been an independent and sovereign state.³

Obviously, although entirely justifiable on the basis of the aforementioned right of self-determination as well as on the cultural and linguistic unity of most of the area, this solution would have resulted in even further losses of territory for the Soviets (Finland, Poland, and the Baltic states had already exercised their options to separate in the wake of the 1917 Revolution). The 1924 delimitation of republican boundaries in Central Asia put up a major barrier to the nationalist's aspirations. Gradually, as Stalin gained power, the Muslim Communists were rounded up, charged with being "nationalist bourgeois," and subsequently liquidated in the Great Purge of the 1930's. Central Asia had been effectively brought under the political control of the Soviet Union.

SOVIET NATIONALITIES POLICY

In order to appreciate the present state of nationality affairs in Central Asia (as well as elsewhere in the USSR), it is important to understand something of the Soviet nationalities policy. The tension between the internationalistic nature of Communism and the reality of a multitude of different nationalities within the borders of the USSR has been a problem right from the genesis of Soviet rule.

What made the incorporation of these national forces into a socialist state especially problematical was the fact that the Bolsheviks, including Lenin, were still basically guided by two convictions. First, the socialist state should be a unitary state. Second, proletarian internationalism, the basic principle underlying the organization of the socialist state and determining its composition, could allow no room for national differences and aspirations.

Despite these convictions, the situation created by the 1917 Revolution forced the Bolsheviks to establish a federal state that recognized the existence of nations.⁴

To get around this ideological problem, the Soviets have devised a theory whereby, as socialist society moves steadily closer to true communism, the nations will gradually move closer together, as a new Soviet culture is created. This is the ultimate aim, although different situations may require different tactics to achieve this goal.

A new human being - 'Soviet Man' (*Sovetskiy chelovek*) will emerge, liberated from the past, free and happy. There will be no spiritual, intellectual or even physical difference between Russians and Uzbeks, Estonians and Kirghiz, they will share the same culture, believe in the same Marxism-Leninism, eat the same food and adore the same rulers. Soviet Man's culture will be the harmonious blending of all the best elements from all national cultures.⁵

This is the ultimate aim, although different tactics have been used to pursue this goal over the past seventy years. Under Lenin, due to both his internationalist outlook and the vulnerability of the young Soviet state in the face of separatist tendencies among many of the nationalities within its borders, considerable tolerance was shown. During Stalin's dictatorship, marked by increased centralization and Russianization, there was a suppression of all nationalist sentiments. Under Khrushchev, the overt Russianization of Stalin was abandoned in favor of a new approach. It was affirmed that, "in the field of national relations, the Soviet system had changed the social consciousness of the USSR's various national groups. From national consciousness they had passed on to socialist consciousness and were moving toward Communist consciousness. As a result, national differences no longer had a *raison d'être*, and were mere 'survivals of the past.'⁶

The Twenty-second Party Congress, held in 1961, saw a further codification of the nationalities policy in the CPSU Party Program, which stated that "The nations will draw still closer together [*sblizhenie*], and their complete unity [*sliianie*] will be achieved."⁷ However, since the fall of Khrushchev, the term *sliianie*, which implies a literal fusion of cultures into one, is less in vogue, having been replaced by the less threatening *polnoe edinstvo*, or "full unity." It is debatable whether the change in terminology will have any effect on the long-term goal. Soviet spokesmen still emphasize that the plan is going ahead on schedule:

The flourishing of the socialist peoples and nations of the Soviet Union has ensured their close unity and general rapprochement. An extremely important result of this polyhedral process has been the emergence of a new type of historical community of people - the Soviet nation.... The merging of the socialist nations is a long historical process; begun in the era in which we are living, it will be completed with the formation of a communist type of ethnic community of people, into which all of mankind will gradually merge after the new structure is victorious throughout our planet.⁸

However, not all Soviet authorities are so optimistic about the progress that has been made, and the persistent nationality problem is a constant source of concern for Moscow, as hinted at by General Secretary Brezhnev at the Twenty-sixth Party Congress in 1981: "The unity of the Soviet nations is now closer than ever. This does not mean, of course, that all questions of nationality relations have been solved already."⁹ The problem was spelled out more directly in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (July 11,1982): "As yet, not everything in national psychology, national traditions and customs accord fully with the essence of internationalist consciousness and communist ideals. Individual manifestations of national selfishness, national conceit and narrow mindedness... still occur."¹⁰

"THE ELDER BROTHER"

The Soviet nationalities policy speaks of an eventual merger into one Soviet culture. However, it is not always clear whether this new culture will be much different from existent Russian culture, given that the Russians constitute, for the moment at least, the majority of the Soviet population, Soviet ideology has been formulated throughout the years mostly by Russians, and Russians dominate the present leadership structure at the all-Union level. Although Sovietization and Russianization are two distinct processes in theory, in practice they often seem to coincide. The Russians saw themselves as civilizing agents in Central Asia during the tsarist era and there is little evidence that this basic self-concept has changed much. Before we are too quick to criticize, however, it must be admitted that the Soviets have accomplished many notable feats in the area: illiteracy has been drastically reduced, higher education has become available to a far larger percentage of the population, the status of women has by and large been raised quite dramatically, medical services have vastly improved, and increased agricultural and industrial output have brought a general standard of living that is higher than practically anywhere else in the Muslim world.

However, in the midst of this, there is the often repeated assertion that the Russians are somehow on a higher cultural level than the natives of Central Asia. This attitude is implicit in the statements of early communists such as Zinoviev, who stated in 1922, "We cannot do without the petroleum of Azerbaijan or the cotton of Turkestan. We take these products which are necessary for us not as the former exploiters, but as older brothers bearing the torch of civilization."¹¹ Soviet cultural policy in Central Asia was summed up by Kalinin in 1929 as "teaching the people of the Kirghiz steppe, the small Uzbek cotton grower, and the Turkmenian gardener the ideals of the Leningrad worker."¹²

Under Stalin, the role of Russia as "the elder brother" was continually emphasized. As the dictator himself remarked at a victory banquet for Soviet army commanders in 1945, "I should like to drink to the health of our Soviet people... and first of all to the health of the Russian people. I drink first of all to the health of the Russian people because it is the most outstanding of all the nations forming the Soviet Union.... It has won in this war universal recognition as the leading force in the Soviet Union among all the peoples of our country."¹³ This line was dutifully repeated by Central Asians in republican leadership positions, such as M. Kurbanov, the Chairman of the Tajik Council of People's Commissars, who stated in 1946, "The toilers of Tadzhikistan will never forget the great help which the great Russian people have shown them, the great Russian people who are the first among the peoples of the Soviet Union and the elder brothers of them all."¹⁴ That this notion has not died with Stalin is evidenced by the claim made in a pamphlet published in Moscow in 1972: "There is no, there was no, and there will probably be no other nation [ethnic group] in the world that, like the Russian people, labored and labors for all the people of the USSR, and not only of the USSR."¹⁵

It is interesting to note the way that this view of Russian dominance has affected the writing of history during the Soviet era. Prior to the 1930's, the official line was that the Russian conquest of non-Russian areas had been an "absolute evil" (*absolutnoe zlo*). Thus, those who resisted the tsarist forces were deemed to be patriotic heroes. During the 1930's and 1940's, the theory was modified so that Russian expansion was now viewed as a "lesser evil" (*naimen'sheie zlo*), compared to the fate that might have befallen the people if the Turks, Persians, or British had conquered them. By the 1950's, The official view was that the Russian conquest was an "absolute good." Those who had fought against it were now denounced. The shift in perspective is well illustrated by two successive versions of a history of the Kazakh people, published in 1943 and 1957. The first described a popular revolt led by Kenesary Kasim in the early nineteenth century as "the culminating point and synthesis of all succeeding movements" revealing "the freedom-loving and fighting spirit of the Kazakh people, who were not easily to be parted from their national independence." The same uprising was described in the second edition as "a reactionary feudal-monarchical movement which dragged the Kazakh people back to the consolidation of patriarchal and feudal conditions, to the restoration of the mediaeval rule of the Khan, and to the isolation of Kazakhstan from Russia and the Russian people."¹⁶

This same perspective, although in a somewhat more subdued form, is still propagated today, as comments by Dinmukhamed Kunayev, former First Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party reveal:

In Tsarist Russia, nationalities problems were especially complicated and acute. The historical destinies of neighboring peoples generated for them an objective need to enter into an alliance

with the Russian people, and accession to Russia saved some of them from annihilation by foreign invaders [read China]. Kazakhstan's voluntary accession to Russia was initiated 250 years ago, and for it this became the starting point for its subsequent historical development. This indissoluble union of Russia and Kazakhstan, consolidated for all time by the Great October Socialist Revolution and welded in the laboring peasantry against the autocracy and the power of the capitalists... enabled our Republic to travel a way equivalent to centuries in a matter of decades."¹⁷

Thanks to this Soviet rewriting of history, the central authorities now have an "objective" foundation upon which the central role that the Russians are to play in the formation of the new Soviet culture can be based. This is the backdrop against which Soviet policy in Central Asia must be viewed.

RELIGION

Both the Russian and the Central Asian cultures prior to the Soviet regime were heavily influenced by religion: the Russians by Orthodox Christianity and the Central Asians by Islam. The tsarist approach to Islam in the Russian Empire depended to a large extent on the ruler at the time. Under Peter the Great (1672-1725), Muslims suffered severe persecution, whereas Catherine the Great (1729-1796) was very tolerant of non-orthodox faiths, including Islam. During the time of the conquest of Central Asia, the attitude of the Russian government was primarily governed by pragmatic considerations. The Russians were content to let the Muslims continue in their traditional way of life, so long as law and order was maintained and the interests of Russian settlers were safeguarded. Large numbers of colonists continued to come to the area to farm and extract local resources such as cotton for the textiles industry in European Russia. There were few outright attempts to proselytize Muslims. A native elite was trained to assist in administering the area and ensuring that tsarist policy was carried out. Although open conflicts did occur, such as the general uprising in 1916 to protest the conscription of Muslims into the Russian army, these were not primarily of a religious nature.

Changes came as a result of the 1917 Revolution. At first, it looked like the new regime would be tolerant of Islam, as on November 22 (December 5) 1917, the Council of the People's Commissars proclaimed:

Muslims of Russia, Tatars of the Volga and the Crimea, Kirghiz and Sarts of Siberia and Turkestan, Turks and Tatars of Transcaucasia, 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! Henceforth 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',¹⁸ and Peasants' Deputies.

However, the new ideology was not like the old. The pre-Soviet Russians, although not Muslims, had at least been *ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book) who followed a revealed religion preserved in sacred scriptures. The philosophy of Marxism was radically different in this area, as pointed out by Nikolai Bukharin at the outset of Soviet power (1919):

'Religion is the opium of the people,' said Karl Marx. It is the task of the Communist Party to make this truth comprehensible to the widest possible circles of the labouring masses. It is the task of the party to impress firmly upon the minds of the workers, even upon the most backward, that religion has been in the past and still is to-day one of the most powerful means at the disposal of the oppressors for the maintenance of inequality, exploitation, and slavish obedience on the part of the toilers.... Religion and communism are incompatible, both theoretically and practically.¹⁹

The Soviets proceeded slowly with their campaign against Islam. During the 1920's Muslim law courts and *medressahs* (religious schools) were closed down and *waqfs* (religious endowments) were confiscated. The campaign was stepped up in the 1930's, as the vast majority of the mosques (there had been over 26,000 of them in the country prior to the Revolution) were closed down or converted to secular use and thousands of *mullahs* (Muslim clerics) were forbidden to practice (many of them subsequently vanished in the Great Purge). With the outbreak of World War II, the need to win over the Muslims to help in the war cause resulted in a relaxing of the policy. At this time, four Muslim Religions Boards were established to provide a formal means for Moscow to control the Soviet Muslims and one *medressah* was reopened in Bukhara (this was supplemented by another one in Tashkent in 1971). Under Khrushchev's atheistic campaign, the state clamped down once again on Islam, closing even more mosques. Since that time, what can only be called a "two-faced" approach has been maintained:

The Soviet authorities foster two quite separate pictures of religious activity. For internal consumption the image is a negative one of decline and inevitable crisis, of religion as a backward and unscientific legacy from the past which will one day disappear. But, for the outside world Moscow is increasingly concerned that foreign visitors, especially those from Moslem countries, should come away with a good impression.²⁰

Thus, on the one hand, Soviet authorities on Islam such as Professor Klimovich can say that Islam is "an anti-scientific, reactionary world concept, alien and inimical to the Marxist-Leninist concept. Islam is the negation of optimistic and stimulating materialistic teaching; it is incompatible with the fundamental interests of the Soviet peoples; it prevents its believers from being active and conscientious builders of communist society."²¹ This official line is repeated by the Central Asian political elite, such as Mukhamednazar Gapurov, the former First Secretary of the Turkmen Communist Party, who stated in 1980:

Religious beliefs have played and are playing an inhuman, reactionary role in disuniting people and setting them against one another. Muslim quack-confessors, champions of old, reactionary principles and rites, operating willfully in the so-called holy places, are trying to kindle religious fanaticism, fuel feelings of national narrow-mindedness and instill in family relations harmful feudal and kinship survivals and rituals.... We must learn purposefully to combine internationalist and atheist education in order to rob nationalism of its religious cover and religion of its claim to represent the nation.²²

At the same time, one may read in a journal such as *Literaturnaya Gazeta* (January 16, 1980) the following: "In our country everyone who professes faith in Islam has every opportunity to observe its precepts, something that even the most barefaced opponents of the Soviet system admit."²³

What has been the result of the Soviet strategy over the past seventy years? "Recent surveys have shown that only 20% of the Moslem community claims to be atheist (and no more than 10 % are of the officially encouraged 'militant' variety). The remaining 80% are 'believers ' of one sort or another, either by conviction or tradition... Among Russians... the proportion is exactly the opposite, with 80% now atheists and 20% believers."²⁴ Though estimates of devout believers may vary anywhere from less than 5 per cent to over 60 per cent, there can be no doubt that, for the vast majority of Central Asians, Islam is still a significant aspect of their ethnicity.

This identification with Islam is kept alive primarily through a number of traditional religious rituals which, despite the efforts of the Soviet authorities, are practised nearly universally, even by staunch Party members and self-proclaimed atheists. Chief among these are circumcision, religious marriage, religious burial and the two great Muslim festivals: *Id al-Fitr* (which celebrates the breaking of the Ramazan fast) and *Bayram Qurban* (the Feast of Sacrifice). Attempts to introduce secularized wedding and funeral ceremonies based on the Russian model have not caught on with the local population.²⁵ In addition, related customs which do not have their origin in Islam, but which are nonetheless associated with the religion by the local population, such as the early marriage of women and the payment of *kalym* (bride price), are also apparently widespread.²⁶

The status of Islam is even stronger in the more conservative rural areas, where the Soviet scholars estimate that over half the population continue to perform the daily prayers and the Ramazan fast.²⁷ Amongst the rural Turkmen, the seclusion of women is still often practiced.²⁸ However, the cities are not exempt either, as evidenced by the following:

The newspaper *Sovet Ozbekistani* carried a surprisingly full account, in its edition of the 26th of September 1982, of a trial of a number of people involved in the printing and distribution of Islamic literature in the Tashkent market. Reading between the lines, one can gather that a

fairly large underground operation was involved but, more significantly, that there exists an even larger clientele for such literature.²⁹

To this picture, another element must also be added. The fact that there are probably only 200 official "cathedral" mosques (where Friday prayers are permitted) presently functioning in Central Asia³⁰ is one of the factors that has resulted in a resurgence of "unofficial" or "parallel" Islam. Underground mosques and *medressahs* are operated by Sufis (Muslim mystics), who also conduct special pilgrimages to the many Muslims shrines still found in Central Asia.

While the present religious situation has not yet erupted into open antagonism against the Russians, the testimony of Abd al-Qadir, a Soviet Turkmen who defected to the Afghan *mujahidin*, is the very thing that Soviet authorities do not want to hear in Central Asia :

Soviet Muslims have not forgotten their past and remember their lost liberty. They also remember the lives they gave to defend that lost liberty. The Russian occupiers have seized our lands, have exploited them without pity and after the October Revolution forced them to become part of the Soviet state. But the Muslim peoples all aspire to liberty and wish to free themselves from the communist yoke and the Russian tyrants. Thus, Soviet Muslims consider the war unfolding in Afghanistan a continuation of their war, the war which brought the Soviet occupation of Central Asia.... Communists often pretend to be the defenders and partisans of religion. They pretend to respect religion, especially Islam, but informed people know that communism and religion are incompatible. Since the October Revolution, communists have fought everywhere against religion and continue to do it.... I emigrated a year and a half ago. Since then I have fought with the Afghan *mujahidin* against the Russian occupation forces. But my duties, my obligations, are not yet discharged. All is not finished. As a Muslim, I consider it my duty to fight until the last drop of the Russian invader's [*zakhvatchiki*] blood and if I live, I will carry out that decision.... I am a former citizen of the USSR but I am going to avenge myself on the Russians, I will fight as much as I can. I will fulfill the *jihād* in Afghanistan. What matters to me are the religious regulations, not my Soviet nationality. I will fight my former fellow citizens. My status is as a Muslim; the Islamic brotherhood represents my citizenship.³¹

From the foregoing, it is obvious that although the status of Islam has undoubtedly been weakened under the Soviet regime, it is far from being an insignificant factor in Central Asia. In the words of a western observer, there is

...a national-religious symbiosis within the Muslim *umma* (community), a merging or overlapping of ethnic and religious sentiments and loyalties that reappears in all aspects of Central Asian experience. It is this symbiosis that so frustrates Moscow in its attempts to integrate the growing Central Asian masses into a common mold as part of the 'Soviet people.' Conquered over a century ago, Sovietized for six decades, modernized, educated, and indoctrinated by a succession of regimes, Central Asian Muslims seem just as remote from Russian reality and intentions as at the outset of Soviet rule.³²

LANGUAGE

Language is an integral component of any culture. "Along with awareness of belonging to a group or attachment to the group name, native language is often taken by Soviet scholars to be one of the most stable of ethnic indicators."³³ As M.I. Isayev, a Soviet linguist has noted, "National feeling, ethnic consciousness,

is largely based on the native language. This is understandable, since in just this language man hears the first words of his mother."³⁴ What, then, has the impact of Russian on Central Asian languages been?

Most of the indigenous languages of Central Asia, with the notable exception of Tajik, are Turkic languages and hence completely unrelated to Russian (Tajik and Russian, however, are both members of the Indo-European language family). All these languages have been influenced to one degree or another by Arabic and Persian as a result of over a millennium of contact with the Islamic religion (for instance, over 65% of Uzbek vocabulary is of Arabic or Persian origin). Prior to Soviet rule, religious affairs were conducted primarily in Arabic, and court life was strongly influenced by Persian. Both languages, with the addition of Chagatay (classical Turkic and the forerunner of modern Uzbek) were utilized in the domains of literature and education. However, the vast majority of people spoke a wide variety of Turkic dialects which (since the Turkic languages are so similar to each other) formed a gradual linguistic continuum from the Kazakhs in the north to the Turkmen in the south. There were no abrupt linguistic boundaries between the groups, especially in areas where several mixed together.

Although the general level of literacy in Central Asia had not risen above 5 per cent prior to the influence of the Soviets, there was nonetheless a long tradition of writing that can be traced back at least to the Turkic Orkhon tablets of the eighth century AD, a full two centuries earlier than the advent of the Cyrillic script in Kievan Rus. As a result of the Islamization of the area, those languages that had a written form utilized the Arabic script.

In this linguistic situation, the Russian language had little impact on the vast majority of Central Asians before the inauguration of the Soviet regime, except for the few elites who were involved in the tsarist administrative apparatus. However, the situation began to change after 1917. The first step was taken in the area of literacy: as noted above, illiteracy was a severe problem in the area (as it was all over the now defunct Russian Empire), so one of the first tasks of the new government was to teach reading and writing, both in Russian and the native tongues. The massive (and, one might add, quite successful) literacy campaign that ensued was heavily influenced by Soviet ideology, as was noted by Kalinin in 1926: "In literacy teaching, all the work must be permeated by the political views of the revolutionary proletariat - otherwise expressed, by the revolutionary theory of Marxism-Leninism."³⁵ Primers used phrases such as "We have fought for the Soviets," "The Soviets have given us land, factories and plants," and "The Soviets are our strength"³⁶

Despite this, however, linguistic Russianization of the minorities was not pursued by the young regime at this time, perhaps as a result of Lenin's internationalist outlook, perhaps in order to avoid upsetting the delicate political situation of the early 1920's. As a result, the early years of the Communist era were characterized by an active promotion of the minority languages in the Soviet Union. Whereas Russian had been the official language in Tsarist times, in the new Soviet state, all of the peoples and languages were declared to be equal. Lenin spoke out vigorously against "Great Russian chauvinism," criticizing those who wished to make Russian the official language of the Soviet Union. As part of this policy, and in line with the territorial delimitation of 1924, separate literacy languages were created for each ethnic group.

However, the subsequent death of Lenin and accession of Stalin to power brought about significant changes, just as they had in the area of religion. Stalin created a highly centralized system which, in the absence of a *de jure* official language, needed a *de facto* one to run the country smoothly--Russian was the only logical choice. The linguistic situation in Central Asia demanded some changes in order for the Russian language to gain acceptance there. Fortunately, the literacy campaign had paved the way for these changes.

The first step was to reform the alphabets, a process which took place elsewhere in the USSR at the same time. During the late 1920's and the early 1930's the Arabic alphabet was replaced by a Latin script similar to that used in Turkey. The final step was taken in the late 1930's and the early 1940's with the adoption of the Cyrillic script for all Central Asian languages. This move successfully cut off the Central Asians from their literary past, as well as a significant connection with the rest of the Islamic world. In addition, it opened the door for subsequent attempts to Russianize the languages.

Two of the primary tactics used to accomplish Russianization in Central Asia have been the promotion of Russian as a "second native language" and the introduction of Russian vocabulary into the local languages, as described in a Soviet tourist booklet:

A great role in bringing the national cultures of the USSR closer together is played by the Russian language, which is the language of communication and cooperation between the nationalities inhabiting the USSR. The study of Russian was never forced on the non-Russian peoples. In 1926 only an insignificant part of the native population in Uzbekistan could speak Russian. But the Russian language soon became popular in Uzbek towns and villages. Today 50 per cent of the Uzbeks speak fluent Russian[note: many Western authorities would question this figure]. If we add to this those who understand spoken Russian, the total will make up the overwhelming majority of the republic's inhabitants. This does not mean that the Uzbek language is being neglected, on the contrary, it is being enriched. Over the years of Soviet rule, Uzbek vocabulary has greatly increased. The latest edition of the *Dictionary of the Uzbek Language* contains more than 60,000 words, many of which were formerly nonexistent. The majority of the new terms included in the dictionary are borrowed from the Russian language; they form the basis of the international vocabulary of the Uzbek language.³⁷

Over the years, the Soviet regime has consistently sought to impress upon the minds of its citizens the leading role that the Russian language is to play in the country. Thus, *Kommunist Tadzhikistan* stated in March 1953: "One cannot overemphasize the importance of the Russian language. It belongs to the nation which has produced great revolutionaries and thinkers of genius; it has become one of the international languages of the world. Lenin wrote and spoke in this language, comrade Stalin writes and speaks in this language."³⁸ Even in 1957, after the death of "comrade Stalin," the message, as stated by I.P. Tsamerian, was still very clear: "The merging of nations in the future, the withering away and the replacement of [their] national tongues by a common language - all this will take place as a result of the flourishing of the Communist nations.... Russian is becoming more and more the common language for all the socialist nations of the USSR."³⁹ Russian is promoted as "the language of the Union's most developed nation, which guided the country through its revolutionary transformations and has won itself the love and respect of all peoples."⁴⁰

However, the campaign has been of limited success. In the area of the attempted Russianization of Central Asian vocabulary, there has been a turn around as local scholars have been steadily rediscovering and reintroducing classical Turkic terms into the lexicon, as well as bringing back Arabic and Persian words which had earlier been removed by the Soviet authorities in favor of Russian words.⁴¹ Neither has the anticipated growth of bilingualism been as favorable as Moscow had hoped. Soviet statistics based on the 1979 census reveal that approximately 50 per cent of Uzbeks and Kazakhs,⁴² and 30 per cent of Tajiks and Turkmen speak Russian as a second language.⁴³ By comparison, the national average for fluency in Russian as either a first or second language among non-Russians was 62 per cent in 1979.⁴⁴ This state of affairs is obviously unsatisfactory, especially in light of current demographic trends, as pointed out by F.P. Filin, director of the Russian Language Institute of the USSR Academy of Sciences: "The correlation along nationality lines of children in the pre-school age group (and also in the school age group) is shifting substantially in favour of the Turkic-speaking population. In this connection, knowledge of the Russian language as the language of inter-nationality discourse is becoming particularly urgent."⁴⁵ Once again it appears that the efforts of the Soviets to manipulate a significant aspect of Central Asian culture have not been as successful as it was hoped.

LITERATURE

Central Asia has a long and rich literary heritage. Because of the general illiteracy in the area in pre-modern times, oral literature played a major role in passing on the history and culture of the people from one generation to another. Indeed, the area is renowned as the home of some of the world's longest oral epic poems. Written literature also developed to a high degree, originally in Arabic and Persian and then, under the influence of the great poet Mir Ali Shir Navai (1441-1501), in Chagatay.

The coming of the Russians did not have a tremendous impact on Central Asian literature at first. Dostoyevsky, during his exile in Kazakhstan, came into contact with some of the emerging Kazakh literary elite and had some influence on a few writers, but by and large the literary scene remained the same. If anything, the Russian presence fueled the fires of literary opposition, as expressed in these lines by the Turkmen poet Kor Mullah (1874-1934):

If this [Russian] nation remains long among us
It will separate our people little by little from the faith!
[Those Russians] as if resembling Jinnis[demons], like swine,⁴⁶
Will separate our people little by little from the faith!...
They will separate us from the elders, from the saints!...
They will separate us from all the [other] Muslims!...
They speak falsehoods, drink "vodka-wine"!...
May God save [us] from these unbelievers, friends!⁴⁷

With the coming of Soviet rule, as in other areas, a significant change came to Central Asian literature. As literacy developed and the national languages of the peoples were engineered and given written forms, writers were forced to conform to the Soviet perspective on literature, as expressed in the theory of "Socialist Realism." Authors were to follow four basic rules:

1. Their work must be realistic in content and form.
2. It must have mass appeal.
3. The message must be an optimistic one.
4. And it must follow the party line (*partynost*).⁴⁸

The novel, a foreign element to traditional Central Asian literature (which centered around poetry) was introduced to the area. At the same time, many of the traditional epics, such as *Manas* and *Alpamysh*, were denounced and even banned, due to their "feudal content." Most of these, however, have since been "rehabilitated." Russian writers such as Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), the founder of the Socialist Realism genre, became the model for Central Asian writers to imitate. The words of Sharaf Rashidov, former First Secretary of the Uzbekistan Communist Party Central Committee, who was himself a writer, sum up "the Party line" on the role of Russian in the development of non-Russian nationality literature:

The works of many of our writers in recent years give proof of their growing literary maturity.... They are mastering the rich experience of the Russian and world classics.... Russian literature with its revolutionary traditions, deep love of humanity, and its true popular spirit is considered the real university where Uzbek writers attain their literary expertise and mastery.⁴⁹

During the Stalin years, as those who were concerned with their own cultural heritage were purged, the only way for a writer to survive was to follow closely the dictates of the Party. Not only was the Russian style emulated, but the Russian people themselves were praised by such poets as the Stalin-laureate Mirzo Tursun-Zade, who wrote in 1946:

The great heroic Russian people are the Eagle-people;
Their flight soars so high!
You gave us the wings, you gave us the strength,
You brought up in us the eagle-like pride...
Of all the world people not one
Is your equal, oh Russian giant!
And my Tadzhik people are now forever joined with you...⁵⁰

However, with the less oppressive policies of the post-Stalin leadership, it has become evident that Central Asian authors are once again re-discovering and re-asserting their Turkic heritage in their works. Thus, the content of their works, instead of conforming to the guidelines set down by the State, often reflects the influence of their long-standing literary tradition. As a result, they are criticized for writing of "nightingales and gazelles instead of railways."⁵¹ As one critic noted:

There are still very few short stories, sketches, tales and novels which present in a true and interesting manner and by means of real conflict and clear characters the lives of our innovative workers and leading engineers in our plants and factories, of our doctors who selflessly guard the health of the Soviet people, of our creative intelligentsia laboring to develop Soviet sciences and culture.⁵²

In addition to dealing with traditional themes, some recent works by native authors even challenge the role of Russians in the development of their culture. Thus, the Uzbek author Mamadali Mahmudov, in his novel *Olmas Qayalar* (Immortal Cliffs, published in 1981) chronicles the tsarist conquest of Central Asia in the nineteenth century but his heroes are the Muslims who tried to repel the Russian forces. Needless to say, the book was officially condemned.⁵³ Equally daring is the 1975 analysis of the early Kievan epic *The Tale of the Host of Igor* by Olzhas Suleymenov, chairman of the Kazakhstan Writer's Union, in which "he attempted to show that it was permeated by Turkic epic motifs and vocabulary, with whole passages paraphrased or translated directly from the Turkic. This monograph was published in Alma-Ata in 1975, and is replete with outspoken accusations of Russian chauvinism and of distortion of early Turkic history."⁵⁴ Not surprisingly, Suleymenov came under harsh criticism from the USSR Academy of Sciences for this work.

Even the popular Kirghiz writer, Chingiz Aitmatov (who is, among other things, a member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, on the editorial board of the journal *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, and one of Gorbachev's favorite authors) has delved into these matters. His novel *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* centers around the efforts of an elderly Kazakh to give his recently deceased friend a Muslim burial in a traditional burial ground. Along the way, through the use of various literary genre, including ancient legends, Aitmatov deals with the importance of remembering one's past and touches on such issues as the forced collectivization of the Kazakh and Kirghiz nomads in the 1930's, the Stalinist purges, and the rewriting of history to suit political aims.⁵⁵ Although there is nothing overtly anti-Russian about the book, it reflects the way in which Central Asian authors are using literature to explore their own past, and in the process, to discover its depth and richness. It is also interesting to note that, on the occasion of a recent publication by a Kazakh writer, Aitmatov commented, "My heart beats with common Turkic pride."⁵⁶

THE DEMOGRAPHIC FACTOR

Before examining the present status of interethnic relations in Central Asia, it is important to understand the crucial dynamic of demography in this area.

At the heart of the problem is the fact that far more Central Asians are being born than so-called white Russians, a process which Soviet officials call--privately of course--the "yellowing" of the Soviet population. The 1979 census of the Soviet Union showed that since 1970 Tajikistan and Uzbekistan had increased their population by 30%, nearly five times faster than the Russian Republic. By the turn of the century Muslims will comprise 20% of the total Soviet population against 15% in 1980 while Slavs will have dropped from 53% to 46% or even less. These figures also mean that by 1995 between a quarter and a third of all recruits into the armed forces will be conscripted from the Muslim regions of the Soviet Union.⁵⁷

Some Western authorities project even higher numbers for the number of Soviet Muslims by the year 2000, perhaps as high one quarter of the population.⁵⁸ At the same time, Muslims, most of them Central Asians, will account for 50 per cent of the annual population growth.⁵⁹

The implications this has for the Soviet armed forces has already been alluded to. Another area that is already being affected by this shift in population is that of labor. Central Asia is experiencing a labor surplus while other parts of the Soviet Union (especially Siberia) suffer from a chronic shortage of workers. However, the Central Asians are not voluntarily moving to where the work is. There are several reasons for this, including the favorable climate, a relatively low cost of living, the rural orientation of many Central Asians,⁶⁰ the generally low levels of technical skills and fluency in Russian and, above all, a reluctance to leave their traditional religio-cultural milieu.⁶¹ This aversion to migration is reflected in the fact that, for four of the five nationalities (the exception was the Kazakhs at 92 per cent), over 97 per cent of their

population lived in Central Asia in 1979.⁶² Not only are Central Asians multiplying rapidly, but their numbers are becoming increasingly concentrated in one location, thus producing a serious obstacle to Moscow's goal of cultural unity in the USSR. One possible outcome of this situation is pointed out by a Western observer:

If Central Asia's Muslims show a reluctance, and European settlers display a mounting inclination, to emigrate from the area, the widespread *korenizatsiya* (indigenization) of the Central Asian republics which is already occurring as a result of Muslim fertility can only accelerate. This will increase the political importance of the Soviet Muslims and of the republics in which they dwell within the broader political system of the USSR.⁶³

Apart from the political and economic implications, however, one should not underestimate the psychological effect this is having on both Russians and Central Asians. "Jokes" have begun to circulate in Central Asia about "the impending restoration of the Tatar yoke [and] the forthcoming confirmation of the proposition that 'when you scratch a Russian you find a Tatar.'"⁶⁴ As for the Russians, the reality of ceasing to be the majority in the Soviet Union cannot be dismissed lightly. A Soviet German émigré related the following incident to a Western researcher: "In the place where my daughter worked, the telegraph office, a Russian said: 'It is terrible, the black race takes over.'"⁶⁵ In conversation with a student from the West, a Kirghiz man gave what is probably a typical native perspective on the Central Asians' ultimate weapon against Russianization: "In my country [i.e. Kirghizia] there are more Russians than Kirghiz. I have four children. It is my duty as a Moslem to have more, perhaps ten. Some day there will be more Kirghiz than Russians. Then perhaps things will be different." [in actual fact, the Kirghiz people do outnumber the Russians in Kirghizia, but the perception of Russian dominance is important to take note of].⁶⁶

ETHNIC RELATIONS

Before ending our evaluation of the impact of Russo-Soviet culture in Central Asia, it will be instructive to look at the present state of interethnic relations in the area. In light of Moscow's express goal of uniting all cultures in the USSR into one new Soviet culture, to what extent is this "friendship of the peoples" evident in everyday interactions between Russians and Central Asians? On the surface, the general absence of overt conflict (some significant exceptions to this will be noted below) would seem to indicate that this is the case. However, looking beneath the surface reveals another picture.

Under tsarist administration, the Russians pursued a similar colonial policy to the British in India. As part of this policy, separate Russian sectors were constructed adjacent to existing Central Asian cities and towns. Here were housed government offices and the local military garrison. Consequently, as a result of

this ethnic segregation, most of the Russians in the area had very little contact with the native population. The Soviets have attempted to integrate housing in Central Asian cities, but social integration seems to be very minimal. David Montgomery, an American who studied in Tashkent on three separate occasions, observed on his third stay in 1982 that, although there were more interethnic social contacts amongst children and youth living in mixed neighbourhoods than there had been previously, this grew steadily less frequent with age, so that there was still "very little inter-ethnic socializing among adults."⁶⁷ Furthermore, Montgomery noted that "there was little serious interracial courting."⁶⁸ and that when intermarriage did occur, it was almost always in an urban context. Even there it was infrequent; in rural areas it was almost nonexistent.⁶⁹ This trend is confirmed by Viktor Kozlov, a Soviet ethnologist:

We have no detailed materials on ethnically mixed marriages in the Central Asian republics, but, judging from available data, the situation there is in many respects similar to that of the Caucasus [generally low], though with yet greater stress on ethnic homogeneity. Among the indigenous peoples of this part of the country and especially in rural areas single-ethnic marriage is the norm; there are some mixed marriages between these peoples (Uzbeks and Tadzhiks, Uzbeks and Turkmen etc.), and also marriages between the local peoples and Russians, mostly between indigenous men and Russian women.⁷⁰

This social separation between the Russians and the local population has resulted in the former having a general lack of appreciation for the culture of the latter. This in turn has resulted in a certain amount of latent ill feelings towards the indigenous people of the area. Montgomery notes some of the comments he heard during his stay in Tashkent. Attributions of laziness are implied: "All the men do is sit in the courtyards or in the teahouses."⁷¹ The mosque is viewed by some with a certain amount of suspicion: "A Russian can't go in; he would be noticed and not welcome; and besides, they use a different language and alphabet there[Arabic]. How can we really know what goes on?"⁷² The frequent Muslim festivals and weddings with their attendant costs draw comments like: "Where do they get all that money?"⁷³ However, there are exceptions to the overall trend, as evidenced by the comments of one Russian woman to Montgomery: "I love the Uzbek people and Uzbekistan; I do not like to be away from them for long."⁷⁴

As the native elite have gained power in recent years, due to the policy of *korenizatsiya*, which has encouraged proportional representation of the nationalities in republican administrative posts, one of the results has been an unofficial policy of reverse discrimination, where national are favored in such areas as higher education and employment, especially in administrative positions. This has resulted in understandable resentment from the Russians and other Slavs in Central Asia, as noted by Montgomery:

Some Soviet Europeans cannot accept the fact that Uzbeks are qualified and attribute their employment at high levels to bribes and other corrupt practices. I heard references to the

allegedly large cotton harvest bonuses being used to "buy" entrance for unqualified Uzbeks to medical schools and other types of advanced training.... And also, there were comments that once Uzbeks had become securely employed in positions of authority and responsibility, they tended to favour only other Uzbeks for employment.⁷⁵

This situation has also been noted by Soviet German émigrés: "They [Moscow] of course want that the whites have the upper hand, but now the blacks [sic] take over everywhere.... The Kazakhs are Kazakhs, they want to raise their people"⁷⁶ "Formerly they used to be silent, downtrodden, but now they shout their songs in the streets. Formerly, the Russians were putting the screw on Kazakhs, but now it is the other way round."⁷⁷ "Just try to say something! If one says something against this the Kazakhs say 'Whose bread are you eating, on whose land do you live?'"⁷⁸ These comments show that it is not only the Russians who have negative attitudes towards Central Asians, but other Soviet Europeans (such as Germans and Jews) as well.⁷⁹

As for the Central Asians, their attitude seems to be less overtly hostile in general. Whether from sincerity or tactfulness, it is common to hear them say of the Russians, "They have been good teachers; we have learned much from them. Some are our friends. However, we are developing a Soviet, but not a Russian, modern life."⁸⁰ At the same time, reminders of their history may serve to bring to the surface other emotions: "Most of the history which I had in school was about the Russians. I wish that they taught more about our people"; "Our people were only conquered by the Russians because we were betrayed by some of our leaders. We have not forgotten this."⁸¹

At times, these underlying tensions have boiled to the surface. In 1969, race riots erupted in Tashkent as Muslim crowds assaulted Russian bystanders at a soccer game. At this time, phrases such as "Russians out of Uzbekistan" and "Russians go home" were heard.⁸² Another incident occurred in 1978 in Alma-Ata, as related by a Soviet émigré:

Last year there was a big quarrel in the university; the Kazakhs say, there should be many more of their own people, not the Russians, or others... Because that's their land, they say.... Now things are getting more difficult [for non-Kazakhs].... the students shouted that the Russians should leave Kazakhstan.... They beat up everybody and attacked people with their knives.⁸³

The most recent outbreak occurred in December 1986, when Dinmukhamed Kunayev, the First Secretary of the Kazakhstan Communist Party, was removed from power and replaced by Gennady Kolbin, a Russian. Apparently, Kunayev had been notorious for favoring Kazakhs in key Party and government positions, a situation that Gorbachev was not prepared to tolerate. Kunayev's fall from grace touched off wide spread rioting in Alma-Ata, at which strong anti-Russian sentiments were expressed by slogans such as "Kolbin - Go Back to Russia", "Russia is Against Us", "America is With Us", "Kazakhs Demand to Join

China", and "Autonomy for Kazakhstan."⁸⁴ The incident resulted in several hundred serious casualties and more than a thousand arrests.

One final area where ethnic antagonism between Russians and Central Asians has surfaced all too frequently is in the Soviet armed forces. This was especially brought out during the war in Afghanistan. Interviews with former members of the Red Army now living in the West have revealed that there is considerable friction between Slavs and Central Asians in the armed forces. There is a very obvious stratification, with the former making up the bulk of the officer ranks and combat units, whereas the latter are primarily placed in labor battalions. Several serious incidents have been reported. "One of the most serious outbreaks occurred earlier this year [1982] at one of the main Soviet bases in northern Afghanistan when Tajik and Turkoman truck drivers, incensed by the 'apartheid' attitude of their white comrades took revenge by setting fire to trucks driven by Russians. The Russians retaliated and fighting broke out."⁸⁵ One ex-soldier interviewed reported how "a young Uzbek soldier whom everyone picked on because he was racially and culturally different finally had enough. One day when the Uzbek was supposed to go on guard duty he took a machine-gun from the rack and ambushed the entire guard detail, killing several and wounding many."⁸⁶ A Russian soldier who defected to the Afghan mujahidin reported, "Violent clashes on a national basis occur within the ranks of the Soviet forces themselves. I particularly recall one such flare-up on a training base in Termez in Uzbekistan between Central Asian and European conscripts. Both sides armed themselves with straps and makeshift cudgels and fought for several hours. Two soldiers were killed in the fight."⁸⁷ These incidents cannot bring much peace of mind to the Kremlin, especially as more and more of the conscripts in "the army of the friendship of the peoples of the USSR" will be coming from Central Asia in the future.

CONCLUSION

There is an Uzbek proverb that says, "Urusni ming maqtasang, kozi kok" (Even though you praise a Russian a thousand times, his eyes are blue)⁸⁸ Both Central Asians and Russians seem to be aware that there are deep differences in their cultures, differences which over seventy years of concerted effort on the part of the Soviets have not overcome. Although Central Asians have admittedly been deeply influenced by the modernization and secularization that the Russo-Soviet culture has brought to them, certain key areas of cultural identity, such as religion, language, and literature, serve to remind the people of the basic differences between the two cultures. It is only during times of forced conformity, such as under Stalin, that

the Central Asians have shown any indication of drawing closer to the Russian culture. When policies are relaxed, the tendency has been to accentuate the things that make them different from their "elder brother." It is still too early to predict what the eventual outcome will be. The tendency for Soviet policy to alternate between different extremes does not make the task any easier. Perhaps the Soviets will be able to leave as strong an impact on the area as the Arabs did over a millennium ago. On the other hand, given the current demographic trends, the cultural influence may eventually work the other way. Moscow would do well to make note of a comment by Count K.K. Pahlen, a tsarist official in the early twentieth century: "I had my first glimpse of that peculiar subtlety with which the Asian regards the European. What I believe to be genuine contempt is veiled by an appearance of outward submission that somehow suggests inner awareness of a culture and an outlook on life vastly older than our own."⁸⁹

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