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Nationalism in Soviet Central Asia

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Summary

In the wake of the Soviet collapse the leadership in Central Asia started to look for an independent source of legitimacy. This was found in the indigenous culture of Central Asians. Native culture, however, has often been presented in nationalist forms. At the present time, the concept of national community is taken out of its historical context and treated as a constant in time, most systematically in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Yet, it was only in the recent times that Uzbek and Turkmen national communities emerged. The Soviet experience was pivotal for the cultivation of these national identities. Local vernaculars were promoted to the status of literary languages. Over seventy years of universal education in the native languages of Central Asia produced a large groups of intelligentsia with great affection for their languages. Language became an object of reverence and a source of identity. Soviet map-making drew borders for national states and trained native elites to administer them. This instilled a sense of loyalty to national territories. Coupled with traditional love of native soil, the national motherland became a forceful idea for those who went through Soviet education.

The Soviet experience was not tantamount to a radical transformation of social relations. It merely imposed modern concepts on traditional societies. Muslim Tajiks, Turkmens and Uzbeks maintained their distrust of Russians and other non-Muslims. They refused social interaction with kafirs and only rarely entered into marital unions with them. This behaviour was justified by reference to both Islam and nationalism. Contrary to Soviet expectations the promotion of national identity did not replace Islam. Instead, national identity acted as a prism for Islam and other features of Central Asian traditions. National myths were rapidly becoming a source of popular fascination and in the process undermining the all-encompassing unity of cultural traditions among Central Asians.

I. Introduction

I.a. Stalin And Nation-Building.

The division of Turkistan into separate republics in 1924 was regarded as a necessary step in the march to the final reintegration of all hitherto tsarist subjects. In conformity with their theory, the Bolsheviks assumed that the unity of workers and toilers of different "nationalities" was attainable following their "national" liberation. Finalising the struggle against the native bourgeoisie would then pave the way for a voluntary unity of the proletariat. To achieve this, the Bolsheviks sought to resolve the "nationalities question". Following the Tsarist perspective, and in conditions of religious homogeneity, the Bolsheviks used the criterion of language to classify the inhabitants of the former Autonomous Republic of Turkistan.

The position of the Bolsheviks in regard to the nationalities question was forged in the years that preceded the October Revolution. Lenin and his party were aware of the explosive potential of national liberation movements against tsarism. They were also influenced by the predominant current of national formations in Europe. Lenin showed

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