

Bolshevism, Patriarchy, and the Nation: The Soviet “Emancipation” of Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Perspective

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At a meeting of the women’s department of the Turkmen Communist Party (KPT) in September 1927, KPT first secretary Halmirad Sähetmīradov waxed eloquent about the Soviet regime’s efforts on behalf of women. In Turkmenistan, he noted, Soviet measures included legal reforms to protect women from forced marriage and arbitrary divorce, a vast expansion of educational opportunities, and the creation of rug-weaving cooperatives to enable rural women to become economically self-sufficient. Yet even more radical steps were necessary, Sähetmīradov declared, because the Muslim states of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan might otherwise overtake the Soviet Union in their progressive policies toward women. “With these states moving ahead on the emancipation of women,” he said, “there is a danger that kulaks, mullahs, and ishans [Sufi leaders] may . . . turn women against us, saying, ‘look, Turkey and Persia are backward states and are adopting such laws, but the Soviet regime is not doing anything for you.’”¹

Soviet policy toward Muslim women in Central Asia was one of radical transformation. The Bolsheviks were determined to abolish archaic practices and customs that degraded and oppressed women, believing that this would help to clear the way for the construction of socialism. The most heavily publicized aspect of this effort was the campaign against the veil, which culminated in mass public unveilings in 1927. Equally important, although less visually arresting, was the Soviet effort to eradicate marriage and family practices based in Islamic and tribal customary law that were deemed detrimental to women. Through the adoption of new laws allowing women to initiate divorce and banning child marriage, bridewealth, and polygamy, Soviet authorities hoped to free women from the constraints of custom and draw them into Soviet schools, collective farms, and mass organizations.² As revolutionary as these policies of female emanci-

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1. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI), f. 62, op. 2, d. 1234 (Protocols and materials from the third republican conference of women’s activists sponsored by the Central Committee of the Turkmen Communist Party, 1927), ll. 49–50, 79–85.

2. Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton, 1974); Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire:*

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pation were, Soviet communists were not the only ones pursuing them in the 1920s; nearby "bourgeois" Muslim states were similarly encouraging unveiling, adopting new codes of family law, and seeking to mobilize and educate women.

In western historical scholarship, there have recently been long-overdue moves toward placing the Soviet Union within a comparative context. Some scholars have debated the similarities between the Soviet multinational state and the European colonial empires of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Others have analyzed Soviet history within the context of pan-European modernity, highlighting the parallels between Soviet practices and those of other European states in the spheres of mass mobilization, ethnic classification, population management, and intelligence gathering.³ This flurry of recent interest in comparative approaches to Soviet history has focused primarily on western Europe, while parallels with other regions, most notably the Islamic world, have received relatively little attention.⁴

Yet such comparison is important and appropriate, particularly with regard to the emancipation of women. The "woman question" was a matter of concern throughout the Muslim world in the early part of the twentieth century, with intellectuals and reformers questioning practices such as veiling and polygamy and demanding education and a greater public role for women.⁵ These social critics, who were part of a broader Muslim reformist movement, were responding in part to the influx of western ideas and western power in the region, but they were not necessarily interested in radical reform along western lines; many were Islamic modernists seeking a way to reform women's status in ways that would be compatible with Islamic values and traditions.⁶ As Adeeb Khalid has shown, the *Jadid* reformers of Central Asia were active participants in such de-

Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia (Ithaca, 2004); Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, the Soviet Project, and the Unveiling of Uzbek Women* (Seattle, forthcoming); Adrienne Edgar, "Emancipation of the Unveiled: Turkmen Women under Soviet Rule, 1924–1929," *Russian Review* 62, no. 1 (January 2003): 132–49.

3. See, for example, the forum on Soviet nationalities published in *Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (April 2000); on Soviet modernity, see the essays in David L. Hoffmann and Yann Kotsonis, eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices* (New York, 2000); Stephen Kotkin, "Modern Times: The Soviet Union and the Interwar Conjunction," *Kritika* 2, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 111–64; David L. Hoffmann, "Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in Its Pan-European Context," *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 1 (2000): 35–54.

4. The leading attempts to situate the experience of modern Central Asia within the framework of the Islamic world are the works of Adeeb Khalid, especially his book, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1998) and Kamp's forthcoming book, *New Woman in Uzbekistan*.

5. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, 1992), 130–40; Margot Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation: Gender and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Princeton, 1995); Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York, 2000), chaps. 5–7; Beth Baron, *The Women's Awakening in Egypt: Culture, Society, and the Press* (New Haven, 1994).

6. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 174; Nikki R. Keddie, "Deciphering Middle Eastern Women's History," in Nikki R. Keddie and Beth Baron, eds., *Women in Middle Eastern History: Shifting Boundaries in Sex and Gender* (New Haven, 1991), 14–15.

bates in the years before the Russian revolution, advocating education for girls and women and restrictions on polygamy.⁷ By the 1920s, concern with the “woman question” in the Muslim world was widespread and came from both above and below. Intellectuals and reformers debated these questions in the press and other public venues. In some regions, Muslim feminists had begun to form autonomous organizations that sought to advance the interests of women. At the same time, several of the region’s states pursued an aggressive form of female emancipation, imposing changes in women’s status on their populations through legal and administrative means.⁸

Sāhetmīradov’s statement demonstrates that Soviet communists were well aware of the “pan-Islamic” context of their gender policies in Central Asia.⁹ As Stephen Kotkin has noted, Soviet leaders wished to appear as “a part of Asia for Asians, and a part of Europe for Europeans.”¹⁰ But how “Asian” was the Soviet Union, really, in its policies toward Muslim women? And which part of “Asia” did the Soviet response to the “woman question” most closely resemble? This essay seeks to place Soviet policies toward Muslim women within a broad pan-Islamic context, comparing Central Asia with two types of Muslim societies in the 1920s and 1930s—those ruled by Europeans (mainly French and British colonies in the Middle East and North Africa) and those governed by an indigenous elite striving for modern nationhood.

The question of empire in Soviet history has been the focus of lively debate over the past five years. Recent works have characterized the Soviet Union as an “affirmative action empire,” an “empire of nations,” and a “veiled empire.”¹¹ Scholars have applied the insights of postcolonial theory to the relations between Moscow and the non-Russian periphery, pointing to the conceptual and rhetorical hegemony of the central authorities, the discourse of backwardness employed to justify Moscow’s rule, and the tactics used by the periphery to resist foreign domination.¹²

7. Khalid, *Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 218–28.

8. See Ellen L. Fleischmann, “The Other ‘Awakening’: The Emergence of Women’s Movements in the Modern Middle East, 1900–1940,” and Mervat Hatem, “Modernization, the State, and the Family in Middle East Women’s Studies,” both in Margaret L. Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker, eds., *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East* (Boulder, Colo., 1999). On Iran, see Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906–1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism* (New York, 1996), chap. 7.

9. Massell noted that the Soviet leadership was concerned at being “outdone” by Muslim “bourgeois” states in the sphere of women’s emancipation. Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 218–20.

10. Kotkin, “Modern Times,” 154. Asia is here broadly defined to include the Islamic Middle East.

11. Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001); Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, 2005); Northrop, *Veiled Empire*.

12. On Soviet conceptual hegemony, see Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*; on the discourse of backwardness, see Douglas Northrop, “Nationalizing Backwardness: Gender, Empire, and Uzbek Identity,” in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford, 2001), and Paula A. Michaels, “Medical Propaganda and Cultural Revolution in Soviet Kazakhstan, 1928–41,” *Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (April 2000): 159–78; on resistance, see Northrop, *Veiled Empire*.

Some historians have stressed the political and cultural similarities between the Soviet Union and the empires maintained by western European states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹³ Others have pointed to crucial differences, such as the Soviet regime's refusal to accept notions of biologically based racial inferiority and its aspiration to achieve equality for all citizens under an ideology of socialist internationalism.¹⁴ A third group of scholars has argued that the Soviet Union possessed features of both an empire and a unitary national state. Empires, they note, tend to promote and consolidate differences, while nation-states seek to foster homogeneity and cohesiveness; the Soviet state, which created separate ethnoterritorial republics within a centralized socialist polity, did both.¹⁵ Scholars of woman and gender in Central Asia have also contributed to the debate about Soviet empire. Douglas Northrop has argued that Uzbekistan should be seen as "part of a wider story of political power and cultural change under colonialism," because of the unequal relationship between center and periphery and the Bolsheviks' all-consuming obsession with abolishing the "backwardness" of private life in Central Asia.¹⁶ Marianne Kamp, in her forthcoming book, counters that Soviet policies toward Uzbek women were not "imperial" at all but typical of the twentieth-century modernizing state.¹⁷

Whatever the merits of the "Soviet empire" thesis may be in broad terms, a systematic examination of French and British policies toward Muslim women in the interwar period reveals little resemblance to the Soviet approach. Soviet efforts at female emancipation were much more like those of the independent Muslim states of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan, where the campaign to emancipate women was part of a larger effort to create a modern, homogeneous, and mobilized population—an objective more commonly associated with aspiring nation-states than with colonial empires. And yet, the political dynamic that emerged in *response* to its policies of female emancipation in the 1920s and 1930s more closely resembled that of the colonized Muslim regions of the Middle East and North Africa. Because the Soviet state was a multiethnic, universalizing socialist state centered in Moscow, female emancipation and nationalism in Central Asia came to be seen as opposed to each other, instead of form-

13. The most straightforward recent statement of the "Soviet empire" thesis can be found in Paula Michaels, *Curative Powers: Medicine and Empire in Stalin's Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, 2003), 4–10.

14. On conceptions of race in the Soviet Union, see Francine Hirsch, "Race without the Practice of Racial Politics," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 30–43. On the idea of national equality, see Yuri Slezkine, "Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Socialism," *Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (April 2000): 227–34.

15. Mark R. Beissinger, "Demise of an Empire-State: Identity, Legitimacy, and the Deconstruction of Soviet Politics," in Crawford Young, ed., *The Rising Tide of Cultural Pluralism: The Nation-State at Bay?* (Madison, 1993), 95; Peter Blitstein, "Nation and Empire in Soviet History, 1917–1953" (unpublished paper, 2005); Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (London, 2000), 10–11.

16. Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, 9, 21–22. Northrop later qualifies this characterization, arguing that the Soviet Union was a hybrid entity that possessed features of the modernizing state. *Ibid.*, 23–31.

17. Kamp, *New Woman in Uzbekistan*, introduction.

ing mutually supportive components of modernity. For many Central Asians, as for many colonized Arabs, women and the family became a sphere that needed to be protected from “foreign” interference, while Islamic and customary marriage and family practices came to be valued as crucial components of “national” identity. Ironically, the active Soviet promotion of linguistic and territorial nations in Central Asia heightened the perception of Moscow’s rule as “foreign” and exacerbated the tension between the consolidation of nationhood and policies of state-led social transformation—a tension that was considerably less evident in the independent Muslim states.¹⁸ My conclusions here are meant to be suggestive rather than definitive, given the paucity of research on women in Central Asian republics other than Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the lack of work on Central Asia in the postwar period, and the gaps in the study of women in Turkey and Iran. I offer them in the hope of spurring further comparative research on the Soviet Union in a pan-Islamic framework.

The Soviet “Emancipation” of Muslim Women: An Imperial Policy?

It is tempting to see the Soviet Union’s gender policies in the Muslim periphery as essentially imperial in nature, especially in view of the similarities in the rhetoric used by Russian Bolsheviks and western European colonizers. Europeans were unanimous in their condemnation of Muslim society’s treatment of women. European travelers, whether western or Russian, were prone to flowery fantasies about the mysterious “eastern” women forced to hide “behind the veil.” They used similar language in describing the oppression and misery under which Muslim women were thought to labor. In the Soviet Union, ethnographers and women’s activists maintained that a woman was “entirely the property of her father and husband.” As one Russian visitor to rural Central Asia wrote, “The woman within her family is considered a slave, her husband is the lord of all things, he decides everything and jeers at her.”¹⁹ Similarly, British and French missionaries and colonial officials described Muslim women as “buried alive behind the veil” and claimed that a man typically treated his wife as a “prisoner and slave rather than . . . companion and helpmeet.”²⁰ Not only did Europeans point to female seclusion and veiling as evidence

18. This is not to say that such tensions were entirely absent in the Muslim states. They may in fact be endemic to nationalist projects, whose “Janus-faced” features have often been noted. As Deniz Kandiyoti writes, nationalism “presents itself both as a modern project that melts and transforms traditional attachments in favour of new identities and as a reaffirmation of authentic cultural values culled from the depths of a presumed communal past.” Kandiyoti, “Identity and Its Discontents: Women and the Nation,” in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader* (New York, 1994), 378.

19. N. V. Briullova-Shaskol’skaia, “Na Amu Dar’e: Etnograficheskaia ekspeditsiia v Kerkinskii okrug TSSR,” *Novyi Vostok*, no. 16–17 (1927): 298–99; RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 801 (Materials about work with women in the Turkmen SSR, 1926), l. 125.

20. Cited in Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 154. See also Judy Mabro, ed., *Veiled Half-Truths: Western Travellers’ Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women* (London, 1991).

that Islam was inherently antagonistic toward women, but they cited oppressive gender relations as justification for foreign rule.²¹

Yet if one considers state actions rather than rhetoric, it becomes clear that Soviet policy toward Muslim women in Central Asia differed substantially from the policies of the French and the British in the Middle East and North Africa. Spearheaded by the women's organization of the Communist Party, the Zhenotdel, the Bolsheviks in the 1920s launched an all-out campaign to transform the status of women in Central Asia and draw them into public life. Muslim women were persuaded to "liquidate their illiteracy," speak at public meetings, and join the Communist Party. Schools for girls were expanded, while women were recruited into government jobs and village soviets, or councils. Islamic and customary practices deemed detrimental to women, such as polygamy, bridewealth, and unilateral male divorce, were banned. In those areas where most women went about veiled, such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Azerbaijan, there was a massive campaign against female seclusion and the veil itself in the late 1920s.²² One can certainly question the degree of success these policies enjoyed in the pre-World War II period, but there can be little doubt about the seriousness of Moscow's intention to "emancipate" Muslim women.

Unlike the Soviets, western colonial rulers were long on rhetoric and short on action, showing little serious interest in transforming the Muslim societies they ruled. In British-ruled Egypt and Palestine and French-ruled North Africa and Syria in the interwar period, the discourse of female oppression was primarily aimed at justifying European rule, rather than bringing about real change in women's lives. This was evident in colonial policies on veiling and seclusion, as well as in British and French policies on Islamic and customary personal status law—the codes that regulated marriage and family life among Muslims and that were roundly condemned by Europeans for their presumed degradation of women. While British and French colonizers imposed European-style criminal and commercial legal codes on their Muslim subjects, they refrained from changing indigenous family law. In British-ruled Egypt in the early part of the twentieth century, the British left personal status law under the jurisdiction of Islamic courts. Colonial administrators opposed imposing western institutions by decree, arguing that "Oriental" societies were fundamentally different from European societies and incapable of rapidly assimilating western ways.²³ This noninterventionist policy in Muslim areas was part of a broader British strategy of avoiding interference in the

21. Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 151–52. In India, too, native "barbarism" in the treatment of women was used as a justification for British colonial rule. See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, 1993), 118–19.

22. For details of these campaigns in Central Asia, see Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*; Northrop, *Veiled Empire*; Adrienne Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, 2004), chap. 8; on Azerbaijan, see Jörg Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall: Stalinismus im Kaukasus* (Munich, 2003), 442–78.

23. Robert Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule in Egypt, 1882–1914* (Princeton, 1966), 86–97, 123–27.

religious practices of colonial subjects. Even when British rulers sought to ban a practice they deemed simply too barbaric to tolerate (such as sati or widow-burning in India, which was outlawed in 1829), they made a point of enlisting local religious authorities to declare that the practice in question was a distortion of “true” religion.²⁴ In fact, the British were so determined to avoid alienating conservative Muslims that they sometimes enforced the very Muslim customs they criticized. Although British administrators railed publicly against the oppression of veiled Egyptian women, British headmistresses in government schools required their female Egyptian pupils to don the veil in the early twentieth century.²⁵ The few indigenous reformers who favored unveiling in the early twentieth century found little support among the British authorities. It was not until *after* the achievement of formal independence in Egypt in 1922 that the unveiling movement gathered steam and Egyptian feminists made a small amount of headway in modifying Islamic laws that disadvantaged women.²⁶ Similarly, in the British mandate of Palestine, while British missionaries and travelers deplored the “degraded” status of Muslim women, the authorities supported the status quo in gender and family relations.²⁷

The French, too, were reluctant to interfere with indigenous marital and family practices. In Tunisia and Morocco, France ruled indirectly through tribal elites and did not interfere with Islamic and tribal customary law; on the contrary, colonial administrators actually sought to codify existing Islamic and tribal law so that French courts could apply it. Each region was allowed to keep its own laws, resulting in a patchwork of different legal codes within each colony. This was both a strategy of “divide and rule” and a highly conservative policy designed to avoid provoking native opposition to French administration. Even in Algeria, the Muslim region the French ruled longest and did the most to assimilate, Islamic and customary family codes remained firmly in place. Although official rhetoric encouraged Algerians to “become like the French,” official policy left the Muslims legally distinct. Here, too, the French sought to codify Islamic law so that French courts could apply it more easily. French law was introduced only in realms not linked to the family and private life, and during more than 120 years of French rule there were no significant re-

24. See Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley, 1998), 15; on British equivocation before the ultimate ban on sati, see Anand Yang, “Whose Sati? Widow-Burning in Early 19th-Century India,” *Journal of Women’s History* 1, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 13–14. Another practice deemed barbaric and degrading to women, the African practice of clitoridectomy, was never banned despite public and Christian missionary pressure on the British government in Kenya. See Susan Pedersen, “National Bodies, Unspeakable Acts: The Sexual Politics of Colonial Policy-Making,” *Journal of Modern History* 63, no. 4 (December 1991): 647–80.

25. Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 342–43; Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 23.

26. Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 92–94, 125–26; on early attempts at unveiling in Egypt, see Beth Baron, “Unveiling in Early Twentieth Century Egypt: Practical and Symbolic Considerations,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 3 (July 1989): 370–86.

27. Ellen L. Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its “New” Women: The Palestinian Women’s Movement, 1920–1948* (Berkeley, 2003), 31–36.

forms to benefit women on such key issues as polygamy, unilateral male divorce, or inheritance.²⁸ (Only in 1959—just three years before Algerian independence—did the French seek to undercut female support for the nationalist opposition by promoting changes in Islamic law and expanding education for women.)²⁹ Nor did the French try to unify and standardize the Algerian legal system. Instead, they formalized the distinction between tribal customary and Islamic law in Algeria, leaving a contradictory mass of different codes that persisted until independence.³⁰ This stands in sharp contrast to Soviet policies, which sought to eradicate Islamic and tribal legal codes and standardize legal norms throughout the Soviet Union.

In French-ruled Syria and Lebanon, the political context was rather different; these former Ottoman territories were part of a temporary mandate granted to the French after World War I. Nevertheless, French policies on women and family law were similar to those in North Africa. As part of its mandate agreement, the French had pledged not to interfere with religious control of personal status law.³¹ Although indigenous feminist organizations in the Levant were pressing for women's political rights and demanding changes in personal status laws by the early 1930s, they received little support from the French mandate government.³² It was not French colonizers who raised opposition to veiling, but indigenous feminists who were inspired by the example of unveiled Turkish and Egyptian women in the 1920s. When one Muslim feminist asked the French administration to promote unveiling as the Turkish state had done, she was rebuffed by the French and shunned as a traitor by male nationalists.³³ The minor changes in personal status laws proposed by the French in the 1930s were not intended to address women's concerns; instead, they were a response to the complaints of Christian communities and constituted an effort to equalize the status of the various religious groups and end the dominant status of Islamic law.³⁴

Along with the failure of colonial rulers to promote changes in personal status laws and veiling practices, there was another important difference between Soviet and colonial rulers: the colonial state's lack of interest in mobilizing or educating women. The Bolsheviks were renowned for their efforts to expand education and basic literacy, especially for girls and women. They vigorously (though not always successfully in the early years) promoted female education and literacy classes in Muslim regions,

28. Mounira M. Charrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley, 2001), 114–17, 132–41; Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York, 1994), 88–90. See also David C. Gordon, *Women of Algeria: An Essay on Change* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), 37–38.

29. Lazreg, *Eloquence of Silence*, 90–92, 134–35; Gordon, *Women of Algeria*, 37–38.

30. Charrad, *States and Women's Rights*, 115, 132–36. On Algeria, see also Lazreg, *Eloquence of Silence*, and Peter R. Knauss, *The Persistence of Patriarchy: Class, Gender, and Ideology in Twentieth Century Algeria* (Westport, Conn., 1987).

31. Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 113–15.

32. On the emergence of women's organizations in the Levant, see *ibid.*, 94–100.

33. *Ibid.*, 127–29, 136–40.

34. Not surprisingly, these changes were fervently opposed by Muslims. *Ibid.*, 152–53.

set quotas for female students at universities and institutes, and went so far as to prosecute men who refused to allow their wives and daughters to attend school.³⁵ In Egypt, the establishment of British control put a brake on the modest expansion of education that had been taking place under the independent ruler Muhammad Ali.³⁶ The British were highly ambivalent even about educating male Egyptians, fearing that too much education might lead to nationalism and opposition to British rule, as had occurred in India. Thus, their policy was to provide just enough elementary education and vocational training to produce Egyptians competent to work for the British administration. They were careful to restrict enrollment and to charge tuition, which limited access for the poorer classes.³⁷ The British showed even less interest in providing education for Egyptian girls. They failed to establish any girls' secondary schools, and they actively discouraged the small number of young women who wanted to get an education beyond the primary level. The colonial administration was also distinctly unsupportive of women who entered the teaching profession, paying female teachers less than their male counterparts and prohibiting women from teaching school after they married.³⁸ In mandate Palestine in the interwar period, the British do-nothing policy on female (as well as male) education was so notorious that Palestinian Arabs referred to it as "the policy of making ignorant." Instead of funding state schools, the British relied on missionaries and charitable organizations to educate native girls.³⁹

The French in the Levant were similarly indifferent to the education of native women and girls. Even though the French oversaw an expansion of boys' schools in their Levantine mandate in the 1920s, they did next to nothing to provide education for girls; the few facilities that existed were sponsored by religious and charitable organizations.⁴⁰ In Algeria, the French colony that was most strongly targeted for assimilation, the French made greater efforts to expand education (mainly in the French language) and restricted traditional Qur'anic schools. Still, after a century of French rule, literacy rates for Algerian Muslims hovered around 10 percent, and French policy focused almost exclusively on education for boys. The few girls' schools that existed were designed to turn out good housewives and mothers, and girls who attended native primary schools were not encouraged to continue on to secondary school.⁴¹ Instead of mobiliz-

35. See, for example, RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1237 (Materials of KPT departments of female workers and peasants on the campaign for emancipation of women in the republic, 1927), l. 15; G. Karpov, "Raskreposhchenie zhenshchiny-turkmenki," *Za partiuiu*, no. 3–4 (March–April 1929): 81, 84.

36. Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 12; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 137.

37. Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 319–24; Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 8–12.

38. Tignor, *Modernization and British Colonial Rule*, 342–43; Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 42–44; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 153.

39. Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its "New" Women*, 42–45.

40. Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 77–90.

41. Lazreg, *Eloquence of Silence*, 62–67, 78; Gordon, *Women of Algeria*, 44–45.

ing and educating women, the French state dealt with them indirectly through male elites, kinship groups, and charitable organizations.

This brief overview should suffice to show that Soviet policy toward Muslim women in the 1920s and 1930s bore little resemblance to that of colonial rulers in the Arab Middle East during the same period. The British and French policies described here are fairly typical of colonial regimes, which (as many scholars of empire have pointed out) tend to be much less interventionist than aspiring nation-states. European colonizers were not keen to mobilize colonized populations but were content to deal with them indirectly through existing elites and kinship structures. They had little interest in reforms that would challenge the status quo and possibly provoke opposition to European rule.⁴²

Despite the lack of action taken by colonial rulers on behalf of Muslim women, foreign rule had the effect of discrediting feminism and undermining indigenous calls for female emancipation. Colonial rule, historians of the Middle East have argued, brought a loss of autonomy and power for men in public life, enhancing the value of the private sphere and buttressing male determination to protect family life from foreign interference. Cultural authenticity came to be associated with Muslim traditions, especially with regard to women and family. Moreover, the patronizing European discourse about oppressed Muslim women only increased the determination of some Muslims to reject western ideas about female emancipation. As a result, when indigenous reformers in colonized regions adopted feminist ideas, they were seen as capitulating to the west in one of the last remaining spheres of life still controlled by Muslims. In Algeria, French disdain for the veil and for Algerian culture more broadly gave new vitality to the veil as a cultural symbol.⁴³ In Palestine, feminists were urged to subordinate their goals to the presumably more vital national struggle against Zionists and the British.⁴⁴ In Egypt, the concepts of family honor (vested largely in female modesty and chastity) and national honor became "inextricably linked."⁴⁵ In general, indigenous feminist movements in colonized areas were vulnerable to accusations that they were undermining the unity and singularity of purpose necessary for the nationalist struggle against colonialism.⁴⁶

Soviet Policies toward Muslim Women in Pan-Islamic Context

If Soviet policies toward women bore little resemblance to those of the leading western European empires, they were remarkably similar to the

42. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 10.

43. Gordon, *Women of Algeria*, 56–60.

44. Fleischmann, *The Nation and Its "New" Women*, 137–40.

45. Beth Baron, *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender, and Politics* (Berkeley, 2005), 55–56.

46. Keddie, "Deciphering Middle Eastern Women's History," 13; Deniz Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam, and the State* (London, 1991), 8–9; Gordon, *Women of Algeria*, 35–36; Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 138–40. See also Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 120–21.

policies of neighboring Muslim states. The Turkish republic adopted radical reforms in the 1920s, including a new legal code in 1926 that was based on Swiss law. This new code abolished polygamy, gave women the right to initiate divorce, and expanded women's rights to child custody. Moreover, Turkey granted women the right to vote and to stand for public office in the early 1930s. Primary education was made mandatory for both boys and girls. The Turkish leader Kemal Atatürk strongly encouraged unveiling, although he never imposed an outright ban on the veil. These reforms were part of a broader effort to bring Islam under state control, secularize Turkish society, and cut its ties to the Ottoman past.⁴⁷

The changes in women's status in Iran under Reza Shah were in some ways less radical but were nonetheless pursued with force and vigor. The Shah followed Turkey's example as he sought to modernize and Europeanize the country after taking power in a military coup in 1921. He promoted education and entry into the public sphere for girls and women, viewing women's exclusion from public life as a primary reason for Iran's political and economic weakness.⁴⁸ The Iranian regime did not go nearly as far as Atatürk or the Bolsheviks, however, in modifying the Islamic basis of the legal system; the family code remained rooted in the shariat, and women saw no improvement of their rights in the realm of divorce and polygamy.⁴⁹ Reza Shah's most radical and controversial policy was his determination to promote European dress for his subjects. The veil in particular was seen as a marker of Iran's backwardness, symbolizing women's exclusion from the public sphere and damaging Iran's image in the west. Men were required to wear European suits and hats, and the veil was outlawed in January 1936. Women were forced to attend—unveiled and in European dress—ceremonies and celebrations of unveiling. Anyone wearing the veil or protesting the policy was subject to arrest and punishment.⁵⁰

47. Nermin Abadan-Unat, "The Impact of Legal and Educational Reforms on Turkish Women," in Keddie and Baron, eds., *Women in Middle Eastern History*, 179–81; Deniz Kandiyoti, "End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism, and Women in Turkey," in Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam, and the State*, 22–23; Zehra F. Arat, "Kemalism and Turkish Women," *Women and Politics* 14, no. 4 (1994): 57–59.

48. On the evolution of Iranian ideas about female education and the nation, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women without Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley, 2005), chap. 7.

49. Afsaneh Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State, and Ideology in Contemporary Iran," in Kandiyoti, ed., *Women, Islam, and the State*, 53–55; Deniz Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam, and the State: A Comparative Approach," in Juan R. I. Cole, ed., *Comparing Muslim Societies: Knowledge and the State in a World Civilization* (Ann Arbor, 1992), 240–41; Mansoureh Ettehadieh, "The Origins and Development of the Women's Movement in Iran, 1906–1941," in Lois Beck and Guity Nashat, eds., *Women in Iran: From 1800 to the Islamic Republic* (Urbana, 2004), 95–96; Homa Hoodfar, *The Women's Movement in Iran: Women at the Crossroads of Secularization and Islamization* (Paris, 1999), 12–13; Cameron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865–1946* (Gainesville, 2002), chap. 5. It was only in 1963 that women received the vote in Iran, and only in 1967 that a family protection law was adopted limiting men's right to polygamy and unilateral divorce. Hoodfar, *Women's Movement in Iran*, 18–20.

50. Houchang E. Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation-Building under Reza Shah," *Iranian Studies* 26, nos. 3–4 (Summer–Fall 1993):

In Afghanistan, too, a modernizing government attempted to transform the status of women in the 1920s. The Afghan leader Amanullah established state schools for girls, abolished female slavery and concubinage, and adopted a new family code in 1921 that banned child marriage, marriage without the bride's consent, and the payment of bridewealth. The new laws also restricted men's right to practice polygamy, and Amanullah encouraged the unveiling of women. But in this case, the leader had moved too far beyond the sensibilities of his compatriots, and the weak Afghan state was not able to push through reforms in the face of entrenched regional and tribal interests. Amanullah's transformation of Afghan society was cut short by conservative opposition that ended in his overthrow in 1929.⁵¹

There are many broad similarities in both the content and the context of gender reform in the independent Muslim states and in Soviet Central Asia. First, in the Muslim states as well as in the Soviet Union, reforms in family law, dress codes, and women's status were enacted from above by an authoritarian state. They were part of a strategy of radical transformation that employed coercion and required the state to act in the face of considerable popular opposition. Moreover, these reforms were primarily intended to promote state goals (strengthening the nation or building socialism) rather than advance the individual rights of women.⁵²

Second, these Muslim states, like the Soviet Union, were determined to mobilize women and draw them into engagement with the state. Policies of female emancipation were part of an attempt to transform women into active citizens who would contribute to their country's development and well-being. This was part of a modern nation- or state-building strategy that sought to shake people loose from their traditional kin and local affiliations and persuade them to identify with a larger political community.⁵³ The emphasis on state-sponsored female education in Turkey, Iran, and the Soviet Union, so strikingly absent in the French and British colonies, is the clearest evidence of this. In his seminal 1974 work, *The Surrogate Proletariat*, Gregory Massell correctly pointed out that the Soviet state championed women's rights in order to substitute state control for patriarchal control of women. It is important to emphasize, however, that this was not so much an "imperial" policy as one typical of the modern state.⁵⁴

Third, in the Muslim states and the Soviet Union alike, "emancipation" at the hands of the state could be less than liberating for women. Historians of the Middle East, like historians of Europe, have pointed out

214–19; Etehadiéh, "Origins and Development of the Women's Movement in Iran," 96–100; Hoodfar, *Women's Movement in Iran*, 13–14.

51. Valentine M. Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (Boulder, Colo., 1993), 217–19.

52. On the statist goals of the Kemalist reforms, see Arat, "Kemalism and Turkish Women," 58–59.

53. Kandiyoti, *Women, Islam and the State*, 9. In Iran, Homa Hoodfar argues, discussions of women's status have been "central to the debate surrounding the national goal of modernizing and building a strong independent nation." Hoodfar, *Women's Movement in Iran*, 40.

54. Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, chap. 4.

that states' attempts to introduce "modernity" have generally brought new methods of social control and surveillance, which may actually decrease the autonomy women enjoy.⁵⁵ Even as they were attempting to mobilize women, the independent Muslim states and the Soviet Union discouraged or banned autonomous female political activity. "Emancipation" often went hand in hand with repression. In countries where there were indigenous feminist movements, the state coopted the discourse of female emancipation and suppressed women's independent initiatives. Thus, in both Turkey and Iran, autonomous feminist and women's organizations were shut down and replaced by state-run organizations.⁵⁶ Surprisingly, feminists did not always resent these government moves. Just as some Jadids in Central Asia welcomed Bolshevik rule as a way of imposing modernity on their conservative opponents, some women in Iran and Turkey welcomed the state's commitment to female emancipation because male nationalist and democratic elites had a history of neglecting female concerns.⁵⁷

Finally, the Soviet Union resembled the Muslim nation-states in that it sought the same transformation for *all* women without differentiating between metropole and periphery. The Soviet belief in the necessity of radical intervention to change women's condition was not limited to Muslim Central Asia. After the 1917 revolutions, the Bolsheviks moved rapidly to emancipate women throughout the Soviet Union from the legal and economic constraints that had made them dependent on men and prevented them from participating in public life. The emancipation of women was part of an effort to create a cohesive Soviet population in which all citizens would (despite belonging to different "nationalities") receive the same education, absorb the same ideology, and identify with the Soviet state as a whole.⁵⁸ In similar fashion, the modernizing Muslim nation-states tried to promote uniformity and identification with the state throughout their territories. Iran under Reza Shah was the most extreme case of attempted homogenization, with the autocratic ruler trying to create military-style uniformity in dress and behavior across all the regions and ethnic groups.⁵⁹ Once again, this bears little resemblance to typical imperial policies, which differentiated between privileged metropolitan and

55. Lila Abu-Lughod, "Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions," in Lila Abu-Lughod, ed., *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton, 1998), 7–8.

56. Kandiyoti, "End of Empire," 41–42; Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam, and the State," 250–51; Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity," 56–57; Fleischmann, "The Other 'Awakening,'" 116–18.

57. Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity," 57. On the Jadids, see Adeeb Khalid, "Nationalizing the Revolution in Central Asia: The Transformation of Jadidism," in Suny and Martin, eds., *A State of Nations*, 145–62.

58. On policy toward women and families in the Soviet Union, see Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993); for a comparative analysis of Soviet attempts to rationalize society and mobilize the population, see David L. Hoffmann, "European Modernity and Soviet Socialism," in Hoffmann and Kotsonis, eds., *Russian Modernity*, 245–60.

59. Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," 222–27.

subordinate colonized populations, while also perpetuating social and ethnic distinctions within their colonies.⁶⁰ Technically, one could object that Soviet policies aimed at transforming women were not *exactly* the same in Russia and in Muslim areas, since policies in Muslim areas specifically targeted indigenous customs that did not exist in Russia.⁶¹ Yet I would argue that the goal of these laws was not to perpetuate the differences between Muslims and other Soviets, but to raise all parts of the Soviet Union to the same level of socialist modernity. More radical policies were needed in the Muslim periphery, the Bolsheviks believed, because these regions had to overcome a more devastating legacy of "backwardness."⁶²

There were, at the same time, significant differences between Soviet policies of gender transformation and those of neighboring Muslim states in the interwar period. The transformation aspired to by the Bolsheviks was considerably more radical. Unlike the Soviet reforms, Kemalist policies did not seek to make Turkish women the equals of men; men were still legally heads of their households, and education for girls was seen primarily as a way of ensuring that Turkish women would be good housewives and mothers for the nation.⁶³ (In this, it should be said, the Turks were not all that different from the majority of European states at the time.) Iran, while going beyond the Soviets by outlawing the veil, was far more reluctant to tamper with women's status under Islamic law. The Soviet reforms were more forcefully and comprehensively implemented than the Turkish and Iranian measures; in Iran, for example, the spread of education for girls was largely limited to urban areas, while the Soviets sought to draw all girls into state schools and to implement large-scale literacy campaigns for women.⁶⁴ (Even in Soviet Central Asia, universal education was more an ambition than a reality in the 1920s and 1930s.)

60. One example of the latter is the French promotion of Berber-Arab difference in North Africa, see Charrad, *States and Women's Rights*, 141; on the tsarist reification of the nomadic-sedentary distinction in Central Asia, see Khalid, *Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 54–55.

61. Douglas Northrop makes this point in *Veiled Empire*, 22.

62. On eradicating backwardness in the Soviet periphery, see Slezkine, "Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Socialism," 228–29.

63. Arat, "Kemalism and Turkish Women," 60–67; Yesim Arat, *The Patriarchal Paradox: Women Politicians in Turkey* (Rutherford, N.J., 1989), 34.

64. Ettehadieh, "Origins and Development of the Women's Movement in Iran," 95–96. For all of Reza Shah's efforts to promote education, his government never made elementary school attendance compulsory. Rudi Mathee, "Transforming Dangerous Nomads into Useful Artisans, Technicians, Agriculturalists: Education in the Reza Shah Period," in Stephanie Cronin, ed., *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921–1941* (London, 2003), 141. In Turkey, too, it appears that enforcement was spotty, though relatively little is known about the implementation of the Kemalist reforms. Gavin Brockett, "Collective Action and the Turkish Revolution: Towards a Framework for the Social History of the Atatürk Era, 1923–1938," in Sylvia Kedourie, ed., *Turkey before and after Atatürk: Internal and External Affairs* (London, 1999), 44–61. Brockett also argues that implementation varied widely in rural areas, and laws that sought to radically change existing practices were ignored or only minimally enforced. Kamp points out that new laws requiring civil registration of marriage were widely ignored in rural areas of Turkey. Kamp, *New Woman in Uzbekistan*, chap. 3.

Perhaps most striking of all were differences in the popular reception of gender reforms. Recent research has found evidence of vigorous and often violent opposition to state policies of female emancipation among Soviet Central Asians. At the height of the campaign to emancipate women in the late 1920s, Soviet secret police reported complaints by Central Asians that “the Russians” were trying to destroy Islam, communalize wives, and destroy the Muslim family.⁶⁵ At Communist Party–sponsored meetings intended to drum up support for gender reform, peasants criticized Soviet policies and refused to vote for the measures.⁶⁶ New Soviet laws making it possible for women to initiate divorce caused riots in parts of Turkmenistan in 1925 and 1926, where native men accused the government of attempting to sow discord within Muslim households.⁶⁷ These disturbances were sufficiently severe that the Turkmen republic’s communist elite responded by limiting native women’s right to divorce.⁶⁸ Most disturbingly, women who unveiled or cooperated with the Communist Party in Central Asia were attacked, raped, and even murdered for their transgressions against gender norms.⁶⁹ According to Marianne Kamp, around 2,000 women were murdered in Uzbekistan alone between 1927 and 1929 in response to the unveiling campaign. These murders were often gruesome, involving the mutilation and desecration of the victim’s body.⁷⁰ In Turkmenistan, women were murdered not for unveiling (since they did not wear the veil), but for becoming party activists, for seeking to divorce their husbands, and for other violations of traditional gender norms. In response, the Soviet state adopted laws in the late 1920s making

65. For examples of such rumors in Turkmenistan, see RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1811 (Summaries, reports, and letters of the permanent representative of the OGPU in Central Asia on the political situation in the provinces . . . on religious sentiments and anti-soviet propaganda among the population, etc., 1929), ll. 193–94; in Uzbekistan, see Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, 204–8.

66. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 440 (Protocols of meetings and report of the KPT Central Committee’s department on work among women, January–February 1925), l. 110; d. 630 (Materials of the Lenin provincial committee of the KPT on the holding of district peasant conferences and other topics, 1926), ll. 36, 38, 44–45; d. 1237, ll. 277–78.

67. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 440, ll. 93–94, 109–10; d. 1237, ll. 68–69; Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 277, 280–81.

68. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 440, ll. 68, 72–73, 92–94; d. 1237, l. 270; d. 800 (Reports and accounts of completed work by KPT Central Committee department of female workers and peasants, 1926), ll. 8–9. For the debate among the leading officials in the Turkmen Communist Party over female-initiated divorce, see Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 3316, op. 19, d. 855, ll. 103–4.

69. On violence against unveiled women in Uzbekistan, see Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, 170–72, 193–95; Shoshana Keller, “Trapped between State and Society: Women’s Liberation and Islam in Soviet Uzbekistan, 1926–1941,” *Journal of Women’s History* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 20–44; Kamp, *New Woman in Uzbekistan*, chap. 8. On violence against emancipated women in Turkmenistan, see RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1811, l. 75; d. 2438 (Materials of the women’s sections of the Communist Party Central Committees of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan . . . about work among women, January–November 1930), l. 65; d. 440, l. 68; on similar attacks in Azerbaijan, see Baberowski, *Der Feind ist überall*, 472–73.

70. Kamp, *New Woman in Uzbekistan*, chap. 8; see also Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 281–82.

it a capital crime to murder or attempt to murder a woman because of her efforts to become emancipated; in the first half of 1929, the Turkmen republic prosecuted sixty such cases, thirty-five of which resulted in a death sentence.⁷¹

Although there was opposition to the gender reforms of the Iranian and Turkish states, it did not reach the magnitude of the upheaval in Central Asia. In Iran, there was considerable conservative resistance to unveiling, especially in the religious centers of Qom and Mashhad and from the religious scholars known as the ulama, for whom the new sartorial laws followed a succession of other state moves to limit religious authority. A demonstration by clerics in Mashhad against unveiling for women and the European hat for men was violently suppressed by the government in July 1935. (Interestingly, this demonstration occurred *before* mandatory unveiling was adopted.)⁷² Traditionalist Iranian women fled across the border into Iraq, wore long dresses and scarves, or visited the public bath only at night in order to avoid being seen unveiled. The government responded with coercion and sought to bring the clerics under more stringent state control. Yet the urban elites—affluent and educated people, especially the young—were for the most part in favor of state policies of female emancipation.⁷³ In Turkey, there was relatively little overt protest directed at Atatürk's campaign for gender transformation, although there was a good deal of passive resistance and foot-dragging.⁷⁴ Perhaps most significantly, there is no record in Turkey or Iran of the sort of violence against emancipated women themselves that so damaged the Soviet campaign in Central Asia—a violence that indicated a deep-seated rage toward those who violated community solidarity and values.⁷⁵

How can we explain the different responses to female emancipation in the Soviet Union and the Muslim states? I would point to several interconnected factors. First, the broader context and ultimate goals of reform were different in the Soviet Union and in the Muslim states. Each of these regimes was determined to introduce European-style modernity into private life. Each sought to promote women's entry into the public sphere and to banish archaic customs that oppressed women. But the Soviets

71. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 2438.

72. Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," 220–21. Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 86–91, 110–11. It is noteworthy that violent resistance to unveiling was greater in Soviet Central Asia than in Iran, even though the Soviet regime never actually banned the veil.

73. Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," 219–21; Parvin Paidar, *Women and the Political Process in Twentieth-Century Iran* (Cambridge, Eng., 1995), 113–14; Ettehadieh, "Origins and Development of the Women's Movement in Iran," 96–100. Ettehadieh argues that the veil subsequently became a sign of class distinction, since upper-class and educated women abandoned it while lower- and middle-class women retained it.

74. Brockett, "Collective Action and the Turkish Revolution," 59–61, 47–50. Religious leaders led peaceful demonstrations in 1925 against the imposition of the European hat for men; these were brutally put down by the government.

75. In Iran, where such violence was rare, a single incident in which a rampaging mul-lah beat unveiled women with a cane was widely deplored in the press. Amin, *Making of the Modern Iranian Woman*, 239–41.

sought to do this in the service of a multiethnic, socialist state, while the Iranian and Turkish regimes each aspired to create a unified and modern nation-state. The Soviet campaign against tradition came at a time when the regime was actively promoting a number of distinct national identities in Central Asia through the creation of national territories and the adoption of ethnic preferences. There was an inherent contradiction between this “nationality policy,” which aimed to promote the unique identity of each Central Asian “nation,” and the policies of social transformation, which sought to create a homogenized, modern Soviet society.⁷⁶

As a result, some indigenous Muslims in the Soviet Union interpreted the assault on custom as an attempt to *deprive* them of their national identity. In Turkmenistan, for example, the embryonic Turkmen national identity was closely bound up with the kinship structures and with the tribal customary law that regulated marriage and family life. Yet the Soviet regime was determined to ban the very social and cultural practices that were most closely identified with being Turkmen—a campaign that seemed suspiciously like “Europeanization” to many Turkmen. Educated elites—those who were most needed to promote Soviet policies to the native population—were caught between support for the new nation and support for social transformation.⁷⁷ Ironically, an indigenous discourse of female emancipation that had existed in Central Asia prior to the 1920s was submerged and discredited by the criticism of female oppression coming from outside the region.⁷⁸ A similar backlash against feminism occurred in colonized regions of the Arab world, where indigenous feminists were deemed traitors to the anticolonial cause (and where unveiled women were sometimes attacked with razor blades or acid.)⁷⁹

There was no comparable conflict between nation making and gender transformation in Turkey and Iran, particularly as the nation increasingly came to be defined in secular terms. Citizens of Turkey and Iran, as much as they may have resented the government’s radical policies of social transformation as an assault on religion and tradition, could not reasonably dismiss them as a product of European or non-Muslim domination. Instead, gender reform symbolized the state’s obsession with modernity and signaled its desire to resist European domination—even as it bor-

76. For a general argument about the incompatibility of Soviet socioeconomic transformation and nationality policy, see Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1993), 106–10; see also Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union* (Boulder, Colo., 1991), chap. 5.

77. In other colonized countries of the Middle East and Islamic world, women’s emancipation similarly came to be associated with European rule and was therefore seen as a betrayal of national values. See Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 138–39; Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 129, 164. In colonized India, nationalists came to define women’s role as an interior sphere of culture in which colonizers did not have the right to intervene. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 116–17, 120–21.

78. On Jadid debates about the “woman question,” see Khalid, *Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 222–28.

79. Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 136–37. Leila Ahmed has argued that the western deployment of feminist rhetoric to criticize Islamic culture has discredited feminism in much of the Middle East. See Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, 165–67.

rowed European ideas and methods to do so. A modernizing nationalist elite in each country welcomed the reforms. Meanwhile, those who resisted state-led social transformation risked being identified, with some plausibility, not just as opponents of modernity, but as opponents of a strong and independent nation.

The conflict between nation making and gender reform in Central Asia was exacerbated by a widespread perception of Soviet rule as fundamentally alien. The important point here is not that Soviet rule of Central Asia was *objectively* more "foreign" than the Turkish and Iranian leaders' rule over their respective peripheries—that is certainly debatable, given the heterogeneous nature of the two Muslim states. It was the popular impression of Moscow's foreignness that mattered. For most Central Asians, it was hard to miss the fact that women's emancipation in the region was most strongly advocated by communist leaders in Moscow and by the overwhelmingly European women of the Zhenotdel. While the top communists in each republic generally supported Moscow's policies (at least in public), native communists at the middle and lower ranks were often visibly unenthusiastic about female emancipation policies, a fact that strengthened the impression that these policies were being imposed by outsiders.⁸⁰ Local officials tended to give low priority to work among native women, regarding this as a marginal task not deserving serious attention. They quickly learned that Moscow's priorities were elsewhere; they might be reprimanded if they failed to meet Moscow's goals of female emancipation, but far more serious penalties were in store if they failed to meet the regime's quotas on collectivization or rooting out kulaks.⁸¹ Moreover, Central Asian communists themselves, expected to set an example for the rural population, did not always implement the directives to emancipate within their own families. Communists who paid bride-wealth, married young girls, took more than one wife, or refused to allow their daughters to attend school were continually being reprimanded and expelled from the party.⁸²

80. Northrop, "Languages of Loyalty: Gender, Politics, and Party Supervision in Uzbekistan, 1927–1941," *Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (April 2000): 191–96; Massell, *Surrogate Proletariat*, 266–84; Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 255–56. On vocal peasant opposition to changes in family law in Turkmenistan, see RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 630, ll. 36, 38, 44–55; d. 1237, ll. 277–78. Even within the Turkmen Communist Party Central Committee there were communists who argued against rapid change in family and gender law. For opposition to the banning of bridewealth at the highest levels of the Turkmen Communist Party in the 1920s, see GARF, f. 3316, op. 21, d. 100 (Union republic reports on legislation about crimes of custom, 28 November 1927–8 September 1930), ll. 78–79; op. 19, d. 855 (Stenographic account of the third session of the Turkmen SSR Central Executive Committee, 1926), ll. 88–89, 102. On high-level communist opposition to Soviet divorce laws, see GARF, f. 3316, op. 19, d. 855, ll. 103–4.

81. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1237, l. 3; d. 2696 (Materials on the emancipation of women in the Turkmen SSR, 1931), l. 134. Terry Martin has distinguished between "hard-line" and "soft-line" policies of the Soviet regime, with the former constituting the regime's main priorities. Policies toward women clearly fell into the "soft" category. See Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*, 22–23.

82. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1237, ll. 6, 267, 280. Of those convicted of customary crimes in Turkmenistan in the second half of 1928, 7.5 percent were party members, candidate members, and members of the Komsomol. Karpov, "Raskreposhchenie

In addition, the lack of success of Soviet ethnic affirmative action policies in this period further undermined the Soviet claim that Soviet rule in Central Asia was “indigenous.” Despite the Soviet state’s efforts to recruit members of indigenous nationalities into the government and promote the use of indigenous languages in Central Asia, these efforts enjoyed limited success in the 1920s and 1930s due to a lack of qualified natives and the resistance of local Russians.⁸³ In Turkmenistan, indigenous party members and cultural leaders alike complained bitterly about the republic’s continuing domination by Europeans instead of by members of the titular nationality.⁸⁴ The dearth of Central Asians in positions of authority created the impression that Europeanization in Central Asia was being promoted by Europeans, while Europeanization in Turkey and Iran was being promoted by native elites.

Because the Soviet regime was perceived as “foreign,” communist authorities were unable to persuade most Central Asians that the emancipation of women was essential to their national development. “Modernity” and “socialism” in the Soviet Union seemed to require giving up one’s identity and capitulating to outsiders, whereas in Iran and Turkey the nationalist state was able to argue that radical reforms—including the highly controversial emancipation of women—would strengthen the nation-state and make it better able to resist European domination. As Elizabeth Thompson has argued, Turkey—unlike the Arab east—was able to reform personal status laws and promote unveiling precisely because changes in women’s status were associated with strengthening the modern nation-state and not with coercion by foreigners.⁸⁵ In Iran, similarly, Reza Shah presented the emancipation of women as essential to the development of the nation. Only decades later, in the 1960s and 1970s, were policies of modernization and female emancipation discredited by the perception that Iran’s national dignity had been damaged by excessive

zhenshchiny-turkmenki,” 83. On communists in Uzbekistan, see Northrop, “Languages of Loyalty,” 191–96.

83. On obstacles to korenizatsiia in Turkmenistan, see GARF, f. 3316, op. 20, d. 156 (Report on the Turkmenization of the state apparatus in the Turkmen SSR, August 1927), ll. 40–41, 119; Ia. A. Popok, *O likvidatsii Sredne-Aziatskikh organov i zadachakh kompartii Turkmenii*, Doklad sekretaria TsK KPT na sobranii partaktivna Ashkhabada, 16. okt. 1934 (Ashgabat, 1934), 30; RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 2587 (Report of the Central Asian Bureau brigade investigating the Bairam Ali district committee of the KPT, 1931), l. 36; RGASPI, f. 62, op. 3, d. 397 (Stenogram of the Second Plenum of the KPT Central Committee, 4–6 July 1929), l. 108; RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 545 (Report by instructors of the all-union Communist Party Central Committee and the Central Asian Bureau on an investigation into the work of the KPT Central Committee and party organizations of Turkmen SSR, March 1926), l. 35. For examples of ethnic conflict surrounding indigenization in Kazakhstan, see Matthew J. Payne, *Stalin’s Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh, 2001), 138–39.

84. See, for example, *Tokmak*, no. 69 (1927), cited in RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 1185, l. 100. See also *Tokmak*, no. 20–21 (1927) and no. 31 (1927), cited *ibid.*, ll. 70, 82. RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 838 (Letters, speeches, articles, declarations by representatives of the opposition, 1927), l. 11. These complaints were also made within the party behind closed doors. See, for example, RGASPI, f. 62, op. 2, d. 490 (Materials of the Central Committee on korenizatsiia of the Central Executive Committee of the Turkmen SSR, 1926–January 1927), ll. 147–49, 152.

85. Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 289.

western influence.⁸⁶ In both Turkey and Iran, moreover, reformers sought to distance gender reform from European models in order to maintain a sense of cultural authenticity. They pointed to their nation's own pre-Islamic history for models of female emancipation, arguing that more recent oppressive (Arab or Islamic) customs regarding women had obscured an indigenous (Turkish nomadic or Aryan) tradition of female equality.⁸⁷ In contrast, the Soviet *rejection* of prerevolutionary models in the interwar period made it harder to dissociate female emancipation from European domination in Central Asia.

One should be careful not to overstate the distinction between "alien" Soviet rulers and the "indigenous" leaders of Muslim nation-states. The Soviet state and party apparatus in Central Asia included indigenous communists who rhetorically and sometimes even enthusiastically supported female emancipation. Turkey and Iran, on the other hand, had their share of local officials who were unenthusiastic about the policy toward women. Moreover, Turkey and Iran, like the Soviet Central Asian republics, were nations in formation in the 1920s and 1930s, with diverse populations and frequent conflicts between center and periphery. In an aspiring nation-state, ethnic minorities and even residents of remote villages may perceive the central government as "foreign." More broadly, a regime may be perceived as "alien" if it moves too far beyond the prevailing social consensus and fails to cultivate allies and support. This helps to explain the overthrow of the Afghan modernizing ruler Amanullah and the reaction, many years later, against "western-besotted" women in Iran.⁸⁸

Despite these caveats, I believe the general point remains valid; the independent Muslim regimes in Turkey and Iran had a certain national legitimacy in the interwar period that the Soviet regime simply could not create for itself. Moreover, I would argue that this "legitimacy gap" actually increased over time. In the aftermath of the "national delimitation" of Central Asia in 1924–25, Soviet ethnic classification and indigenization policies tended to solidify the distinction between "indigenous" Muslims of the titular nationality and "alien" Europeans within each republic.⁸⁹ Thus, in the Soviet Union the consolidation of a distinct national identity within each republic came into ever sharper conflict with the "modernization" of Soviet society, especially (but not exclusively) the transforma-

86. Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity," 63–70. Because the dictatorial regime of Reza Shah's son was strongly identified with both a pro-western stance and women's rights, women's activism had become discredited in Iran by the 1970s. See Hoodfar, *Women's Movement in Iran*, 22–23, and Paidar, *Women and the Political Process*, 167.

87. Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," 223; Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam, and the State," 243; Arat, *Patriarchal Paradox*, 31–32. In Egypt, similarly, feminists sought examples of emancipated women in the Pharaonic past. Badran, *Feminists, Islam, and Nation*, 91, 144–45; Baron, *Egypt as a Woman*, 30–31.

88. Kandiyoti, "Women, Islam, and the State," 251, 260; Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity," 49–51, 63–70; Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," 220–22. Other reasons for the Afghan overthrow include overall state weakness and the strength of regional, ethnic, and tribal interests. Hafizullah Emadi, *Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan* (Westport, Conn., 2002), 59–66.

89. Adrienne Lynn Edgar, "Nationality Policy and National Identity: The Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, 1924–29," *Journal of Central Asian Studies* 1, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1997): 2–20.

tion of women's status. In the independent Muslim states, the dynamic was different; modernization and nation making moved in tandem as the two regimes sought to unite and transform their diverse populations under a single, centrally dictated narrative of nationhood. To borrow Adeb Khalid's terminology, modernity and authenticity began to diverge in Soviet Central Asia in the interwar period in a way that they did not (at least not yet) in Turkey and Iran.

Soviet policy toward women in Central Asia in the 1920s and 1930s, although not imperial in intention, was nevertheless imperial in effect. Soviet policies toward women were far more similar to those of modernizing Muslim states like Turkey and Iran than to those of British and French colonial rulers. Yet the outcome of these policies was to reinforce Central Asians' attachment to traditional family structures and make it harder to reconcile feminism with Islam and indigenous nationalism—a dynamic more typically found in colonized parts of the Islamic world. Thus, as Douglas Northrop has shown, Uzbeks in the interwar period became more attached to the veil as a national symbol as a result of the Soviet anti-veiling campaign. Similarly, my own research in Turkmenistan has shown that Turkmen came to regard their family and marital traditions as essential sources of identity in the face of the Soviet onslaught.⁹⁰ I am skeptical of the claim that policy toward women was central to Soviet plans in Central Asia; it seems to me that other aspects of the region's socioeconomic transformation were more vital to the Soviet leadership.⁹¹ Yet even if the transformation of gender roles was of secondary importance from Moscow's point of view, it may well have been primary in shaping the *response* to Soviet rule and the consolidation of national identities in Central Asia. Further research, especially on the postwar period, is needed to confirm this.

This analysis of Soviet policy toward Muslim women supports the notion that the Soviet Union was neither an empire nor a unitary state but had features of both. Yet it also suggests that—at least in this particular area of Soviet social transformation—the “imperial” features of Soviet policy cannot be discerned exclusively through an examination of the center's policies and practices. In the campaign to emancipate Muslim women, similarities to contemporaneous colonial empires manifested themselves primarily in the *response* to Soviet policies, not in the policies themselves. As Mark Beissinger has argued, the subjective dimension is crucial to distinguishing between a state and an empire; the actual content of state policies matters less than “whether politics and policies are accepted as ‘ours’ or rejected as ‘theirs.’”⁹² For a significant portion of the population, this perception constituted a crucial difference between Soviet Central Asia and its independent Muslim neighbors.

90. Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, 13–14; Edgar, *Tribal Nation*, 258–60.

91. This was Massell's argument in *Surrogate Proletariat*, recently reaffirmed by Northrop in *Veiled Empire* (11–12). I have argued elsewhere that communists in Turkmenistan readily sacrificed the emancipation of women to maintain the support of male “class allies” such as poor and landless peasants. See Edgar, “Emancipation of the Unveiled,” 132–49.

92. Beissinger, “Demise of an Empire-State,” 99.