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Source: *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 3 (Jul., 1981), pp. 352-369

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/151077>

Accessed: 26/09/2010 09:12

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THE BASMACHI OR FREEMEN'S REVOLT IN TURKESTAN 1918-24

By MARTHA B. OLCOTT

ONE of the episodes of the Civil War period¹ which has been almost completely ignored by Western scholars is that involving the *Basmachi*,² or Freeman's Movement. The opposition which the Bolsheviks encountered in Turkestan³ was possibly the most pervasive challenge to Soviet rule; widespread armed conflict between Red forces and the *Basmachi* lasted for six years⁴ and had the support of virtually all sectors of Turkestani society. Unable to defeat the *Basmachi* solely through conventional military means, the Soviet authorities were forced to modify the economic and social policies previously introduced in order to achieve a stable political order in this region.

The reason for the existence of Turkestani opposition to the Bolsheviks, as well as for its strength, was that the introduction of the Soviet regime in Turkestan was more than just a change in political administration. It was an attempt to restructure Muslim society. This effort was resisted initially by the traditional authorities (the feudal aristocracy, tribal leaders, clergy, large and middle landowners, and the merchant class) as well as the peasants and tribesmen of the villages and countryside. In the course of their revolt the *Basmachi* also gained the support of the Dzhadidi⁵ (Muslim reformers), Pan Turks, and Turkestani nationalists who had been early supporters of the Bolsheviks. At its height the resistance enveloped all of Turkestan, transforming itself into a Muslim Peoples' Movement.

The Soviet takeover in Central Asia was a political, economic, and social revolution. The Bolsheviks called for the immediate nationalization of all land, including the *waqf* (clerically owned) lands; an action which threatened the power of the traditional leaders. The Soviet authorities in Tashkent introduced anti-religious legislation which outlawed Koran schools and closed all *Shari'a* (religious) courts. The social tensions implicit in these unprecedented actions were exacerbated by the previous isolation of Central Asia from even the most moderate ideas.⁶

Turkestan was possibly the most backward area of the Russian empire. It consisted of two protectorates, the Khanates of Khiva and Bokhara, as

well as the Russian colonial province of Turkestan. The social and political structures of the native population had been left virtually untouched by Russian conquest and administration, and remained little changed from the Middle Ages when Turkestan had been an important centre of Islamic civilization. The Russian society existed parallel to the Muslim one. The smaller towns remained purely Muslim in character and the cities were Russian in both character and origin, save for a Muslim quarter in each.

There was one profound change which did occur during the colonial period—the substitution of cotton as a cash crop in place of subsistence agriculture, in an attempt to create an indigenous supply of raw materials for the nascent Russian industries. The state asserted itself as first owner of all land and limited secondary ownership to those who worked or directly supervised their own holdings, a provision designed to break up the large *waqf* holdings.⁷ The position of the vast majority of the Turkestanis, small landowners and tenant farmers, also declined because they were now subject to market forces; during the last quarter of the nineteenth century the terms of trade of cotton to food crops declined. Discontent over the economic situation was worsened by the attempts of the colonial administration to circumscribe the power of Islam. In addition to limiting *waqf* holdings the Russians reduced the *zakat* (religious tax), and restricted pilgrimages to Mecca. Popular unrest increased and resulted in the Andizhan Uprising of May 1898, which was an attack on the Russian garrison at Osh led by an important Naqshabandi Ishan, Muhammed Ali Khalfa Duchi (Ishan Madali). Rioting continued for three days, at the end of which the leaders were arrested⁸ and the bands dispersed. At the time of his trial Ishan Madali claimed his revolt was to protest against the colonial policy towards Islam and he attributed the deterioration of morals in Central Asian society directly to Russian policy. Although periodic attacks on Russian land-owners continued, there were no further acts of large-scale violence directed against the Russians until the 1916 Uprising.

The economy of Turkestan was altered by the onset of World War I when internal trade networks collapsed and the region was cut off from the markets and grain of European Russia. Those who were able to returned to subsistence farming. In June 1916 a major political and social encroachment was added: the first Russian draft of Muslims into the labour detachments. For the first time the Turkestanis were asked to make a personal sacrifice for the colonial power, to leave their homes and families unprotected to participate in a war in which they had little interest. Furthermore they were asked to fight with the infidel against the Caliph, and although ties between Central Asia and the Ottoman Empire were weak, Istanbul was a respected centre of Islamic learning.

Spontaneous rioting began as soon as the declaration was published. Disturbances were reported in Andizhan, Dzhizak and Namangan, all later to become centres of *Basmachi* resistance. In July all of Turkestan was placed under martial law (which remained in effect until the Russian Revolution) and harsh punishment was meted out to the native population, including the forcible evacuation of over half a million Kirghiz and Kazakh nomads from choice farmland in Semireche province.

The political situation in Turkestan during the period of the Provisional Government, February to October 1917, was a rather confused one. A few SR-dominated Soviets were established, but the authority of the Provisional Government was recognized by most Russians and Turkestanis.⁹ The Muslims were divided into two groups the *Shuro-i-Islam* (Islamic Council) and the *Ulema Jemyeti* (Board of Learned Men). The former were Dzhadidi, participants in the All-Russia Muslim caucus, and were committed to the reorganization of the Russian empire as a federated democratic state where Muslims enjoyed full and equal rights. The second group was solely interested in the preservation of Islam in Turkestan, the assurance of the rights of the clergy and the supremacy of *Shari'a* law. The two united to form the 'National Centre',¹⁰ dominated by the Dzhadidi,¹¹ and committed to the creation of an autonomous Muslim-dominated Turkestan.¹²

The 'National Centre' collapsed following the October revolution. The Tashkent Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, composed primarily of Russian railroad workers, seized power in the name of the Bolsheviks.¹³ The *Ulema Jemyeti* voted to support this government, but the *Shuro-i-Islam* argued for the creation of an autonomous Muslim regime. The Tashkent Soviet however, on 15 November 1917, voted to exclude all native Turkestanis, who they claimed were not organized on a proletarian class basis. The two Muslim groups reunited into the *Ittifoq-ul-Muslimin* (the Union of Muslims) which on 13 December 1917, the anniversary of Muhammed's birth, announced the formation of the Kokand Autonomous Government, an autonomous Turkestanian regime governed by *Shari'a* law.

From December until mid-February both groups claimed to be the legitimate authority in Turkestan and both regimes sought recognition by the Bolsheviks, the Tashkent Soviet as Marxists and the Kokand government as Turkestanis expressing their right to self-determination. Initially, as Turkestan was effectively blockaded by General Dutov to the north, a choice did not have to be made. But on 18 January 1918 the White siege was temporarily lifted and Moscow despatched arms and supplies to Tashkent. On 14 February 1918 Russian Red Guard detachments began a three-day siege of Kokand. When they successfully breached the Old City walls the Red forces launched a vicious attack,

massacring the inhabitants, killing over 14,000 people and forcing prominent Muslim leaders to flee from the city.¹⁴

It was at this time that the *Basmachi* movement was born. In the months following the destruction of the Kokand government raids were launched against Russian settlements and more particularly against the Red Army detachments. Over the next six years this resistance grew from sporadic attacks to an all-out war and then in 1924–26 declined into localized resistance, which resumed during the period of collectivization. Most early resistance to the Bolsheviks was in the Fergana Valley area, where the majority of the sedentary population of Turkestan was found. Following the Soviet takeover in Khiva and Bokhara fighting broke out there as well. These disturbances, led by tribal elements, had begun as a reaction to the local Khans and later were directed against the Soviet invaders. In the later years of the *Basmachi* revolt these forces became directly allied with the fighters in Fergana.

The first resistance was organized and led by Irgash, the former chief of militia for the Kokand government, who had the support of prominent landowners. His first attacks were in response to the nationalization campaign of the summer of 1918. By the end of 1918 he had established a network of allied *kurbashi* (leaders) and had over 4,000 fighters under his command.¹⁵ Muslim opposition to the Soviet regime increased steadily during 1918 and 1919 as new *Basmachi* leaders emerged and their ranks swelled. At the end of 1919 there were over 20,000 *Basmachi* fighters.¹⁶ Soviet control was limited to the city of Tashkent; the countryside and smaller towns were in sympathy with the rebels or under rebel control.

During this period *Basmachi* resistance was quite decentralized. The various fighting bands were in contact and often mounted unified attacks, but there was a constant struggle about who was supreme commander. There were two rival claimants: Irgash, who enjoyed the support of the Ulema faction,¹⁷ and Madamin Bek,¹⁸ who had the support of more moderate Muslim elements. In March 1919 Irgash attempted to unify the resistance and called a meeting of some forty *Basmachi* leaders to consider the question of the administration of Turkestan.¹⁹ The meeting acknowledged Irgash as commander, the 'Amir-al-Musulman',²⁰ and Kurshirmat (Irgash's personal deputy and eventual successor) and Madamin were named as his two deputies. Each of the forty *Basmachi* leaders was awarded a separate territory to defend and administer with the assistance of a religious-political adviser from the *Shuro-i-Islam* or *Ulema Jemyeti*. This organizational scheme does not seem to have lasted beyond the summer of 1919. In August 1919 Madamin Bek, commander of what he termed the 'Muslim Peoples' Army',²¹ joined with a certain Monstrov, commander of the (Russian)

'Peasant Army' to form the Fergana Provisional Government. This was the most successful and long-lasting²² *Basmachi*-Russian collaboration, surviving both Monstrov's death in January 1920 and Madamin's surrender in March of the same year. The alliance enjoyed support from merchants and townspeople of both nationalities. Madamin and Monstrov held a constituent assembly which drew up an eight-point platform to ensure freedom of speech, press and education and calling for the establishment of an elected assembly and a five-member cabinet. Although the cabinet was named it is doubtful if the elections were ever held;²³ during its seven-month life this government did not successfully execute policy, but it sought political recognition and military aid from abroad.²⁴

During their first two years in power the Bolsheviks recognized the severity of the military threat posed by the *Basmachi* but were handicapped in their efforts to defeat them by the White blockade of Siberia. Furthermore the White armies in Siberia and Russia posed a greater threat to Bolshevik rule than did the *Basmachi*. These fronts fully occupied Moscow's attention, and the problem of the *Basmachi* was temporarily left to the local authorities. In February 1919 the Tashkent Soviet organized the 'First Extraordinary Congress for the Liquidation of the *Basmachi*', which led to the creation of a united Red command in Turkestan. Following a decisive defeat of Kolchak's forces in Siberia in May 1919 much-needed arms and supplies were sent to Tashkent and in July 1919 Moscow despatched M. V. Frunze and the Fifth Army to recapture Turkestan. Although Frunze himself met unexpectedly heavy White resistance and did not reach Fergana until mid-1920, by September 1919 the Soviet forces had recaptured two of the largest cities in the area, Osh and Dzhelalabad, but the important centres of Andizhan, Namangan and Kokand were still under *Basmachi* control, as was the countryside. But the *Basmachi* now faced trained and well equipped Red regulars, and in the first half of 1920 they suffered several decisive defeats, including those of Madamin and Monstrov.

After Madamin's death in May 1920²⁵ the *Basmachi* resistance in Fergana became more decentralized. Kurshirmat attempted to succeed him and gathered over 8000 troops under his personal command, but his attempts to form a unified command were hampered by the mutual hostility of the Uzbek and Kirghiz tribesmen.²⁶ This tension came to greater prominence following Madamin's death when the mediating presence of the merchant and city-dwelling classes was removed. Although no longer directly active in the movement, these groups continued their financial support. By the end of 1920 the *Basmachi* had been driven from almost all the cities to small towns and mountain settlements, where they were able to blend easily with local residents.

They continued to launch raids against Soviet troops and supporters²⁷ and maintained control of the railway and telecommunication lines until the end of 1921.

In October 1919 the Bolsheviks despatched the newly formed *Turkkommissiya* (Turkestan Commission of the RCP(b)) to Tashkent to study the causes of the *Basmachi* revolt and the popular support it enjoyed.²⁸ Their investigation led Moscow, in July 1920, to disband the entirely Russian Tashkent Soviet and replace it with a Provisional Central Committee composed of Russian and Turkestan Bolshevik supporters. The *Turkkommissiya* concluded that the *Basmachi* threat would not end with its military defeat but that its 'political disarmament'²⁹ was necessary as well, and so throughout 1920 and 1921 the Bolsheviks tried to improve their image in Turkestan.

Their immediate concern was to end the famine which had occurred during the Civil War.³⁰ Grain was shipped to Turkestan and further economic relief accompanied the introduction of NEP in March 1921, which substituted taxation in kind for the previous policy of forced land and cotton requisitions.³¹ A policy of land reform was introduced³² and in August 1921 the communist party of the Turkestan ASSR³³ offered amnesty and homesteads (from newly seized lands) to all *Basmachi* who surrendered.

Tomsky (a member of both the Politbureau and the *Turkkommissiya*) argued that the policies of NEP did not meet the most critical objection of the Turkestanis, that the Bolsheviks were a direct threat to Islam and the traditional way of life. Temporary concessions to religion had to be made, he maintained, *Adat* (customary) and *Shari'a* law restored and a *laissez-faire* attitude adopted towards the *waqf* lands.³⁴ In October 1921 the *Shari'a* courts were restored but further concessions to religion were not made until May 1922, in response to *Basmachi* success in Khiva and Bokhara.

In both Khiva and Bokhara there was a long-standing tradition of conflict between the feudal rulers of these oasis cities and the tribal leaders from the surrounding countryside who were required to pay tribute. This economic rivalry over control of land and water was exacerbated by ethnic or cultural differences.³⁵

The Khanate of Khiva became a Russian protectorate in the 1880s after a not entirely successful military campaign by the Russian army. From about 1910 on the Khan's power had been seriously undermined by challenges from the Young Khivan Party (a rump caucus of Dzhadidi, Pan-Turks and nationalists), as well as from Dzhunaid Khan, the Turkmen tribal leader who became *de facto* ruler in 1916. The Khan was formally deposed by the Soviet authorities in April 1920 following two years of sporadic fighting between Soviet and Turkmen forces. After the

declaration of the pro-Soviet Young Khivan government, the Khorezm³⁶ Peoples Soviet Republic (KhPSR), Dzhunaid fled to the Karakum desert where he organized detachments of fighters (called *Basmachi* by the Soviet regime) to oppose the Soviet government in Khiva. He and his fighters were in contact with the rebels in both Fergana and Bokhara.

The Khanate of Bokhara did not come under Soviet control until late August 1920.³⁷ On 1 September 1920 the Emir was succeeded by the pro-Soviet Young Bokharan government,³⁸ the Bokharan Peoples Soviet Republic (BPSR). The Emir fled first to Eastern Bokhara and then to Afghanistan whence he personally directed local opposition to the Soviet regime. For most natives of Bokhara the shift from a conservative Muslim Khanate to a secular anti-religious state constituted blasphemy, and the Emir had little trouble mustering support from the city-dwelling clerics and merchants. Even his traditional rivals, the Lokai tribesmen led by Ibrahim Bek, quickly rallied to his defence and comprised the fighting ranks of the *Basmachi* in Bokhara. The *Basmachi* maintained control of western Bokhara until February 1921, when they were forced to move their operational centre to eastern Bokhara.

The arrival in eastern Bokhara of Enver Pasha, leader of the already deposed Young Turk government, on 10 November 1921, led to the revitalization and centralization of the *Basmachi* revolt. Enver, a romantic adventurer, came to Russia to see Lenin's philosophy in action. Sent to Bokhara to convert the Muslims to the Bolshevik cause, upon surveying the situation at first hand he joined the opposition instead. He expected to be able to defeat the Bolsheviks and planned to use independent Turkestan as the nucleus of a Pan-Turk confederation which was also to include Chinese Turkestan, Afghanistan and Turkey.³⁹

His arrival in Bokhara coincided with growing disillusionment with Bolshevism among many Muslim nationalists. Unlike the situation in Khiva and Bokhara, the Fergana *Basmachi* had always maintained some rapport with all sectors of the Muslim community and happily accepted the defection in 1920 of Zeki Validov (former President of the Bashkir Autonomous Republic) and his entourage. Validov had become convinced, based on his experience in Bashkiria,⁴⁰ that the Bolsheviks opposed Muslim religious and cultural autonomy, and that any concessions made to Islam were temporary, made to gain the acquiescence of these nationalities. This argument gained popularity when, in October 1921, some members of the Young Khivan Party were arrested and charged as revolutionaries. Enver⁴¹ encouraged the Young Khivans and Young Bokharans to join the *Basmachi*, which they did even though many of these people had previously fought against Dzhunaid Khan and Ibrahim Bek. The *Basmachi* received important defectors from the leadership of the KhNSR and BNSR governments⁴² as Muslim reformers

found that in their commitment to a Muslim society and a religiously inspired morality they had far more in common with the tribal leaders who had an entirely different understanding of Islam than with the Bolsheviks who believed in a contrary universalistic philosophy.

Enver's magnetic personality and his call for *jihad* (holy war) struck a responsive chord among the Turkestan masses. He did not try to apprise them of his Pan Turkic dream, but he spoke in a simple and romantic language which they could understand and assimilate.⁴³ The speech he made upon joining the *Basmachi* is an example of this:

I have decided that I must go to eastern Bokhara. If we succeed, we shall be victors for the faith. If not, we shall fall as martyrs on the field of battle. We must fight for Turkestan. If we fear the death which fate ordained and prefer to live as dogs, we shall deserve the curses of our forebears and of our descendants alike. But if we have the courage to die for freedom, we shall ensure the freedom and happiness of those who follow us.⁴⁴

Enver increased the fighting strength of the *Basmachi*. There were over twenty thousand men under his direct command and several thousand more serving under allied commanders. He created a unified army in Bokhara, introduced a Western-style chain of command, and sprinkled his ranks liberally with Turkish officers.⁴⁵ By the spring of 1922 Enver's forces had recaptured all of eastern Bokhara and most of western Bokhara. For the first time there was a measure of coordination between the various resistance forces throughout Turkestan. Regular meetings were held between the leaders of Khiva, Bokhara and Fergana and triangular supply routes established.⁴⁶ He was also responsible for regularizing contact with the Afghans who had been providing arms, assistance and asylum for the *Basmachi* since 1919.⁴⁷ If Enver had been permitted to continue it seems likely that he could have upset the Bolshevik plans for a Soviet Turkestan. In July 1922 an all-out campaign to find and kill him was launched and by mid-August Enver and his personal force had all been eliminated.⁴⁸

Enver's presence also helped to revitalize the Fergana *Basmachi*, and a new centre of resistance was organized in and around the city of Samarkand.⁴⁹ In early 1922 Soviet attempts to implement their policy of land reform led to a resurgence of the *Basmachi*, and Sufi brotherhoods are credited with helping to organize and maintain the *Basmachi* forces in the Samarkand area.⁵⁰ These forces were unified at the April 1922 Muslim-Turkestan Congress held in Samarkand, which declared support for an independent Turkestan and Turkish republic based on the principles of private ownership and rule by *Shari'a* law.⁵¹

Moscow considered the secession of Turkestan to be unacceptable both because of Soviet dependence on Turkestan cotton and because the secession would provide a dangerous precedent. Thus, once the

seriousness of this new *Basmachi* threat became apparent a new military and political strategy was put into effect. The local Red forces were supplemented by crack regulars (with aerial support) and for the first time Muslim troops were employed in an attempt to reduce the racial character of the fight.⁵² *Basmachi* leaders were offered amnesty and the guarantee of limited tribal self-rule.⁵³ Major political concessions were made in a resolution of the RCP(b) of 18 May, 1922 'On Turkestan and Bokharan Matters', which departed from Lenin's anti-religious teachings and opted for a gradualistic approach to Islam in Central Asia. This resolution provided for the return of *waqf* lands, increased autonomy for *Shari'a* courts and the legalization of Koran schools. Congresses were held to convince Muslim clergy of the Soviet regime's tolerance of Islam and, using the language of the Koran, Party spokesmen warned that refusal to support the Bolshevik government would lead to renewed religious repression.⁵⁴

The new Soviet social policy coupled with their more aggressive military presence led to a reduction in the level of popular support for the *Basmachi*. By late 1922 all of the major *Basmachi* leaders in Fergana were dead, captured or in hiding and their troops were disbanded and awarded land. By the spring of 1923 the Soviet authorities felt secure enough to begin land distribution and to restore the cotton economy, which made it more difficult for *Basmachi* bands to obtain food. This destroyed the economic self-sufficiency of the native society. That spring and summer there was a revival of opposition. However, the promise of land combined with increased Soviet military force was able to restore general quiet, although localized resistance continued in some mountainous regions to the end of 1926 and revived briefly in 1929 at the start of collectivization.

Enver was succeeded by Selim Pasha, his chief lieutenant, who lacked the personal dynamism necessary to maintain the sense of unity which Enver had created, and the *Basmachi* in Bokhara suffered substantial defeats in the months following Enver's death. Selim managed to hold out against the Soviet forces until July 1923 and then fled to Afghanistan. By the end of 1924, although scattered bands of *Basmachi* existed in the mountains and deserts, the Soviet victory was assured and a civilian government replaced the occupation force in the area.⁵⁵ Ibrahim Bek, the Lokai tribal leader, launched a last major offensive in 1926 and then fled to Afghanistan.

The defeat of Dzhunaid Khan's forces in Khiva was more difficult, largely because of a premature crackdown on religion by the local authorities. The October 1923 constitution of the Khorezm SSR⁵⁶ declared the separation of church and state, deprived clergy of their voting rights and called for the nationalization of the *waqf* lands.⁵⁷

The Khivans responded quickly to this direct attack on Islam. Dzhunaid Khan, supported by Khivan merchants and clerics, took control of the city of Khiva in January 1924 and held it for a month. The Soviet regime quickly increased its military presence in the area, and by the end of the year had driven Dzhunaid and his supporters back into the desert. Dzhunaid continued to launch periodic attacks on Soviet troops and transport until he fled to Iran in late 1927.

In 1925 Moscow began a programme of 'sovietization' of Central Asia, designed to achieve social change in piecemeal fashion. In that year the bourgeoisie and clergy were formally banned from public office, but the Soviet authorities were unable to prevent the political participation of these classes in the rural areas. In June 1927 *waqf* holdings were reduced, and in September 1927 the *Adat* and *Shari'a* courts were closed. Restrictions on Koran schools were introduced in 1925,⁵⁸ leading to their decline, and in 1929 they were banned entirely. The first five-year plan in 1928 called for the nationalization of all remaining *waqf* lands.

The beginning of forced collectivization provoked one final sustained outburst of *Basmachi* resistance. The call for complete collectivization with its mandate for the nationalization of all land and the resettlement of the rural population on new collective farms implied a change in the social structure of Turkestani society. It marked the end of Soviet appeasement of traditional authorities. Stalin⁵⁹ had decided to pursue a policy of social and economic revolution regardless of the cost and Islam was a particular target. The Soviet authorities believed that the Muslim clergy were retarding economic development and social progress in general and inciting the masses against entering the new collective farms.⁶⁰ Consequently, collectivization was accompanied by an anti-religious drive; throughout the 1930s mosques and Koran schools were forcibly closed and thousands of clergy arrested.

Local resistance to collectivization was particularly strong in eastern Tadzhikistan and western Turkmenistan, areas where due to previous *Basmachi* resistance the Bolsheviks had proceeded cautiously and had left traditional economic and social structures almost entirely intact. Ibrahim Bek and Dzhunaid Khan returned from their respective exiles⁶¹ to organize and direct the resistance. They appear to have gathered many of their former fighters,⁶² and were able to prevent the collectivization of eastern Bokhara and western Turkmenistan until late 1931.⁶³

Ibrahim Bek controlled an organization of 200 *kurbashi* and over 2,000 men, who were supported and protected by the rural authorities and religious leaders. The *Basmachi* controlled the Tadzhik countryside until April 1931, when the 83rd division of the *OGPU*⁶⁴ was sent to defeat them, and by June 1931 the *Basmachi* threat was defused, Ibrahim Bek was under arrest and the remaining fighters in exile.

Dzhunaid Khan and his son Ishik Khan directed a force of about 1,500 men⁶⁵ which drove the Soviet party workers and local militia from the Karakum region and in May 1931, by then some 5,000 strong, took control of the regional centre in Krasnovodsk. The city was recaptured on 23 June 1931 by a force of 20,000 men from the 24th regiment of the 63rd *OGPU* division. By September 1931 the *Basmachi* (about 3,000 men) were driven back into the Karakum, where they continued periodic attacks with ever diminishing force until their final defeat in October 1933.⁶⁶ The *Basmachi* had been able to prolong their resistance because they blended easily into the displaced rural population that was amassed at railway stations and in shanty towns. The defeat of the *Basmachi* in Turkmenistan marked the end of organized Central Asian resistance to Soviet rule.

The interesting thing about the *Basmachi* was not that they were defeated, but that they remained a threat for most of the 1920s. The military superiority of the Soviet forces was unquestionable, and from 1920 on the Red forces were well armed and commanded by a trained officer corps. Most *Basmachi* leaders had little or no formal military training and their weapons were of an irregular quality.⁶⁷

Given their military disadvantages, how did the *Basmachi* resist defeat for so long? The answer is found in the diverse nature of the *Basmachi* leadership, the availability of a large fighting force, their advantage as guerrillas in their knowledge of the terrain; and finally, and most critically, they enjoyed the support of virtually all sectors of Turkestani society.

The Soviet authorities in their unending attack on the *Basmachi* legend falsely depict the *Basmachi* leaders as bandits and brigands. The first leaders of the *Basmachi* were people who had been marginally involved in the Kokand Autonomous Government or in other quasi-official positions. Many were from moderate land-owning families and some were members of the local aristocracy. A few were from influential large land-owning families and still others the sons of influential merchant families. Almost all had received some religious education and many were religious leaders.⁶⁸ Even tribal leaders like Ibrahim Bek and Dzhunaid Khan were literate and respected men⁶⁹ who demonstrated their flexibility by absorbing Pan Turks and moderate Muslim reformers into their organization.⁷⁰

The economic stagnation of the Civil War years (like economic dislocation at the time of collectivization) provided a seemingly limitless and ready source of fighters. The *Basmachi* bands were recruited by the individual *kurbashi* from among the unemployed cotton growers and tenant farmers in their localities and thus fighting was limited during sowing and harvesting periods.⁷¹ Each leader had a separate territory

under his complete control, and was responsible for the recruitment and provisioning of his own forces.

Fighters were openly recruited in the countryside, as well as in the towns and cities. The *kurbashi* promised their recruits free food, arms and horses. There was a great deal of variation in the organization, provisioning and training of the *Basmachi* forces, which varied from loosely organized bands to well disciplined troops.

Each *kurbash* provided for his fighters by requisitioning provisions and levying taxes on the population of his territory, and the *Basmachi* were able to maintain an effective system of taxation and requisitioning when the Soviet regime was unable to do so. Although sometimes threatened, the population was generally quite willing to share what it had, viewing the *Basmachi* demands as payment for services rendered. Generally the taxation was in kind, but in the larger and more prosperous areas the *Basmachi* dealt in currency and worked through the remains of the colonial banking network.⁷²

In less prosperous times a rather novel system of provisioning was employed, the phenomenon of the 'winter Red'. When their provisions ran out, entire bands of fighters 'surrendered' to the Reds and received food and armaments as the terms of armistice. When the new harvest was ready, the *Basmachi* 'defected' *en masse* and resumed their opposition.⁷³

Another ingenious means of supply was found by some *Basmachi* leaders who simply requisitioned provisions from the local Soviet governments.⁷⁴ These requests were usually met even in regions already captured by Red forces because although Soviet in name, the local authority structure remained unchanged from the pre-revolutionary period, traditional leaders merely assuming the new Soviet titles.⁷⁵

The Soviet authorities had discovered that while it was hard to conquer Central Asia, it was even more difficult to rule it. The communist party in Turkestan was small and its native personnel were ideologically unreliable. The vast majority of Turkestanis were Muslim believers,⁷⁶ and even the most devoted communists, those who worked in the central party apparatus in Moscow, were committed to national autonomy within a socialist framework and not the victory of the communist revolution *per se*.⁷⁷

Although Islam provided a basis for unity there remained some very important divisions within Turkestanis society, divisions which would have undermined the stability of any independent Turkestanis government. The city and countryside had long competed for limited natural resources.⁷⁸ Conservative Muslims, moderate reformers and Turkestanis socialists each had a unique understanding of Turkestan's problems and the proper path for its development. Nonetheless all

elements of Turkestan society were agreed on one, and possibly only one, issue: Islam and Turkestan were unquestionably linked. Even if the understanding of what Islam was varied, religion was a fundamental part of the self-identity of the Turkestanis.⁷⁹

One cannot over-emphasize the role of Islam in the genesis and maintenance of the *Basmachi* resistance. The role of religion in the movement is admitted but played down by the Soviet authorities because of their need, even today, to acquit themselves of the charge of being an enemy of Islam. But the *Basmachi* understood them as such, and this was the basis of popular support for the resistance. The *Basmachi* believed themselves to be fighting a holy war, a *jihad*, and those who refused to fight risked condemnation by religious tribunals.⁸⁰ The fighters in Fergana called themselves 'an army of Islam', and their leader, Irgash, was '*Amir al Musulmin*', 'leader of the true believer'.⁸¹ Various *Basmachi kurbashi* called for supporters to fight for 'the defence of *Shari'a*',⁸² 'for the solemnity of Islam',⁸³ for 'the restoration of the days of *Shari'a*',⁸⁴ to fight 'in the name of our founder and prophet, Muhammed, [in the name of] *Shari'a*, honour and the good of religion and the nation'.⁸⁵

These were not merely rallying cries. The *Basmachi* leaders, conservative Muslims and reformers alike, believed that they were fulfilling a religious mission in opposing the Bolsheviks and their supporters. The following quotations demonstrate this quite clearly. The first was written by a Fergana *Basmachi* and the second by a member of the Young Khivan Party:

... if you do not take measures towards your liberation from the muck, then you will wander from your age-old true path, you will forget your religion, nationality and history. Then you will be morally responsible for such a crime and will suffer the anger and malevolence of our God.⁸⁶

We recognize the religious duty to fight against you, you who burst into our land despite the wishes of our people. We are glad to spill your blood and be a martyr to the faith.⁸⁷

The Turkestanis had a holistic view of Islam and society, and most did not perceive distinct economic, political and social subdivisions. The *waqf* lands were an economic force, but they were owned by the seminaries to support religious activities. Consequently the Soviet policy of land reform at the expense of the *waqfs* was anti-religious, as was any policy designed to eliminate the cleric as local authority and arbitrator of disputes. The Muslim reformers maintained a somewhat more sophisticated view. They sought a new and expanded role for religion, to be achieved through the limitation of the conservative seminaries. But what they advocated was the co-existence of religious and secular thought, and not the replacement of religion as the social keystone. In

the light of such values it is easy to understand why the *Basmachi* interpreted Soviet policy as an attack on religion. The conservative Muslims were enraged by the direct attack on traditional society. The moderates, critics of traditional society themselves, saw the Soviet attack as only the first stage of a policy designed gradually to erode the primacy of Islam.

The *Basmachi* played a critical role in the political modernization of Turkestan by bringing together the various elements of Central Asian society in an effort to defeat a common enemy, and through this action the basis of a common consciousness was formed. For the first time the Turkestanis began to develop a political identity, primitive and partially submerged though it was. In the shared act of resistance people began to perceive a sense of community and shared fate. Previous to this the population had no sense of collective identity but had viewed themselves as Muslims, and either as residents of a particular village or town or members of a certain clan or tribe.

By the end of the uprising this was no longer the case. The rebellion brought people from throughout Turkestan into contact with each other, and they realized that they were all trying to protect the same thing. For the first time social cleavages became less important, as the Central Asians placed an increased emphasis on what they shared: a certain way of life, similar languages and customs, and of course the same religion, Islam.

The fledgling sense of national identity was pragmatic or experimental rather than ideological. By prematurely thrusting the conservative elements of Turkestan society into the political arena and thus escalating their development of a political awareness, the Soviet regime went a long way towards wedding modernism with conservatism and laid the foundations for the nationalist feeling which has persisted to this day. The intellectuals of Central Asia, communists and non-communists alike, still fondly recall the pre-Soviet period and see some virtue in traditional society and its Islamic heritage, a heritage in which the *Basmachi* are accorded the status of national heroes.⁸⁸

The *Basmachi* legacy is important to the Soviet authorities as well. The prolonged resistance in Turkestan demonstrated that Muslim society was, as the Koran stated, an *umma* (a community), capable of surmounting internal division when the existence of Islam was perceived to be threatened. The Soviet authorities learned that Islam was not just a religion but a way of life, and traditional Muslim authorities could muster strong defences to protect the sanctity of religion. To eliminate the religious basis of society required an effort nothing short of all-out war. In the first half of the 1920s the Soviet authorities decided that the destruction of traditional society was not worth this price. When they

reversed this decision at the time of collectivization they discovered that the cost in terms of lives and property was even greater than anticipated. Even then the Soviet victory was a partial one, as Islam withstood the vicissitudes of Stalinism.

As a recent Soviet study concluded, the defeat of the *Basmachi* was not a defeat of Islam.⁸⁹ Islam continues to be an important force in Soviet Central Asia, particularly in the rural areas. Although doctrinally weak by Muslim standards, Islamic heritage and practice continues to mould the belief system of most Central Asians, and so despite the fact that a social revolution has occurred, the achievement of communism in these republics is for Moscow but an elusive dream.

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¹ For a detailed history of the Civil War in the national regions see Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, 1954).

² The term *Basmachi* comes from the Turkish verb *basmak*, to plunder. The name *Basmachi* was given to this resistance by the Russians. The Turkestani fighters referred to themselves as the *Beklar Hareketi*, the *bek* or freeman's movement. Alexander Park, *Bolshevism in Turkestan* (New York, 1957), p. 34.

³ *Basmachi* resistance occurred in the colonial state of Turkestan (which included the provinces of Syr Darya, Semireche, Fergana, Samarkand, and Transcaspia) and the protectorates of Khiva and Bokhara. This territory is now divided into four republics, the Kirghiz SSR, Tadzhik SSR, Turkmen SSR, and Uzbek SSR.

⁴ The *Basmachi* resistance posed a direct military and political threat to Soviet rule from 1918–24; local resistance continued from 1924–26 and was revived again during the collectivization campaign in 1929–32.

⁵ The Dzhadid movement was directed toward the creation of 'new method' Muslim schools which combined secular education with religious teachings.

⁶ The proportion of Turkestanis who had travelled outside the region or had been exposed to Western-style education was lower than in any other national region of the Russian empire, save perhaps among the Daghestani mountaineers.

⁷ However the *waqf* holdings that were retained were profitably cultivated with cotton.

⁸ Of the approximately 3,000 participants 77 were arrested, 25 convicted and 19 executed.

⁹ The authority of the Provisional Government was effectively challenged by the Tashkent Soviet from 12–16 September 1917.

¹⁰ The Milli Merkez, earlier known as the Turkestan *Musulman Merkez-i-Surasi* (the Turkestan Muslim Central Soviet). Serge Zenkovsky, *Pan Turkism and Islam in Russia* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 227.

¹¹ Although the Dzhadidi were clearly in the minority among the Muslim population.

¹² As a concession to the Ulema, autonomous Turkestan was to be supervised by a *Mahkame-i-Shari'a* (clerical court).

¹³ The members of the Soviet were almost all SRs.

¹⁴ They also commandeered food stocks, and later 25–50% of the population died from famine. Such harsh actions had not been sanctioned by Moscow. Park, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹⁵ Yu A. Polyakov and A. I. Chugunov, *Konets Basmachestva* (Moscow, 1976), p. 36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

¹⁷ He had himself declared Khan of Fergana at the holy site of Khazrat with prominent Ulema and Ishans in attendance. Shamagdiiev, *Ocherki istorii grazhdanskoi voiny v Fergane-i-doline* (Tashkent, 1961), p. 58.

¹⁸ Whose proper name was Muhammed Amin-Ahmed Bekov, son of a Margelan merchant and former member of the Soviet and Muslim Deputies under the Provisional Government.

¹⁹ Shamagdiiev, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

²⁰ 'Leader of the true believer'.

²¹ Unlike Irgash's troops, this army included a system of rank, but authority was divided in traditional territorial fashion.

²² The cases of Russo-Turkestanian collaboration include the June 1918 defection of the Dzhelalabad Soviet army to the *Basmachi*, Irgash's support of Colonel Osipov's ill-fated uprising in January 1919, Kurshimat's successful recruitment of Russian fighters in 1920, and it is reported that Admiral Kolchak sent arms and 40 officers to Dzhunaid Khan (see T. G. Tukhtametov, *Rossiia i Khiva v kontse xix-nachale xx veka* (Moscow, 1969), p. 129).

²³ D. D. Zuev, 'Ferganskoe Basmachestvo (1918–1922)', *Grazhdanskaya Voina*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1924), p. 40.

²⁴ Although some Afghan aid was forthcoming, Colonel P. T. Etherton, British consul in Kashgar, turned down Madamin's request because Etherton believed Madamin's government too weak to survive. See his *In the Heart of Asia* (London, 1925), p. 167.

²⁵ Madamin Bek was condemned as a traitor and killed by Kurshimat when he tried to arrange the latter's surrender. F. Bozhko, *Grazhdanskaya voina v Srednei Azii* (Moscow, 1930), p. 32.

²⁶ The Soviet authorities played on these tribal rivalries to undermine *Basmachi* solidarity. 'V Turkestane bor'ba s Basmachestvom', *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*, 10 October 1921, p. 5.

²⁷ The *Basmachi* concentrated their attack on Soviet troops and Soviet official establishments (party and governmental offices, factories, etc.) but they also carried out violent reprisals against Turkestanis who worked for the Bolsheviks, to make an example of them to the rest of the community.

²⁸ As one observer commented, 'the mass of the population at the bottom represented a united front, anti-Soviet and anti-Russian', Zuev, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

³⁰ Shipments of grain were sharply reduced from 1914 onwards, but they ceased altogether at the beginning of November 1917. The cotton economy collapsed and a subsistence economy was reintroduced, although even grain production was sharply reduced. It is estimated that over one-third of the population died during the famine of these years. Park, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

³¹ The local Soviet authorities had generally been unsuccessful in their efforts to nationalize the Turkestanian land.

³² The policy of land reform involving the redistribution of *waqf* land and the holdings of large landowners was unpopular and largely unsuccessful until after 1925.

³³ The Turkestan ASSR was created in April 1921.

³⁴ Zuev, *op. cit.*, p. 66. Tomsky also argued for increased economic latitude for the Turkestanis; the restoration of the bazaars and limited freedom of trade.

³⁵ In Khiva the Uzbek Khanate opposed Turkmen tribesmen. In Bokhara the distinction was between the 'Sart' (Tadzhik) culture of the city and the semi-nomadic character of the Uzbek and Tadzhik tribesmen.

³⁶ Khorezm (Khwarizm) was the ancient name of Khiva.

³⁷ The Soviet regime had made an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Emir in 1918.

³⁸ The Young Bokharan Party was similar in composition and ideology to the Young Khivans, and had been banned in Bokhara by the Emir.

³⁹ F. Il'yutko, *Basmachestvo v Lokai* (Moscow, 1925), p. 58.

⁴⁰ See Zenkovsky, *op. cit.*, for a lengthy description of the Tatar-Bashkir problem.

⁴¹ Although his philosophy was seen as dated in Istanbul Enver still had great credibility among the Turkestanian reformers.

⁴² These included Usman Khodzha, chairman BNSR; Abdul Khamid Arifov, Commissar of War BNSR; Faizulla Maksim, Commander of Militia BNSR; Muhdine Maksim, head of the BNSR Cheka; Bulyam Ali Khan, Social Minister KhNSR and Niyaz Kuliev, Foreign Minister KhNSR, who served as Dzhunaid's secretary.

⁴³ As Castagne, a Frenchman who witnessed the Civil War in Turkestan observed: 'In the Pan-Islamist ideology which guided his enterprise he was alone, isolated and was unable to mobilize on this basis the Muslim masses who were strangers to this great overall religious unity'. *Les Basmachis* (Paris, 1925), p. 52.

⁴⁴ Fitzroy Maclean, *A Person From England* (London, 1958), p. 346.

⁴⁵ Some of these were also sent to train the troops in Khiva and Bokhara. Enver also arranged for Kurshirmat to send some Kurbashi to Afghanistan for military training.

⁴⁶ S. B. Ginzburg, 'Basmachestvo v Fergane', *Novyi Vostok*, no. 10–11, 1925, p. 191.

⁴⁷ Afghan support of the *Basmachi* was part of Amanullah's strategy to create a Central Asian Confederation.

⁴⁸ Maclean, *op. cit.*, p. 346.

⁴⁹ Previous *Basmachi* resistance in the Samarkand oblast had centred around the cities of Khojent and Pendizhent.

⁵⁰ L. Klimovich, *Islam* (Moscow, 1965), p. 194. It is difficult to estimate the overall impact of the *Naqshbandi* (the dominant Sufi *tariqa*). Several Sufi Ishans and their followers fought with the *Basmachi* and in general *Basmachi* influence was very strong in Sufi strongholds.

⁵¹ T. Saidbaev, *Islam i obshchestvo* (Moscow, 1978), p. 194.

⁵² The Red Tatar Brigade was sent to Turkestan and they were augmented by Uzbeks of the Karluk tribe, longtime rivals for control of the Lokai valley.

⁵³ *Istoriya Khorezmskoi Narodnoi Sovetskoi Respubliki (1920–1924 gg.)*, (Tashkent, 1976), p. 232.

⁵⁴ Saidbaev, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁵⁵ In 1924 the Uzbek SSR, Turkmen SSR, Tadzhik ASSR and Kirgiz AO were created.

⁵⁶ This regime, which excluded all members of the Young Khivan Party, replaced the KhPSR.

⁵⁷ Saidbaev, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

⁵⁸ They were required to introduce a uniform secular curriculum, and there were restrictions placed on the replacement of teachers.

⁵⁹ By 1928 Stalin had managed to eclipse his rivals for power and was in control of policy making.

⁶⁰ Some of the slogans the clergy popularized were: 'Allah does not want collectivization', 'Allah does not like kolkhozes' and 'Land ploughed by tractors has been made sinful'. A. Tulepbaev, *Torzhestvo Leninskoj agrarnoj politiki partii v respublikakh Srednej Azii* (Moscow, 1967), p. 99.

⁶¹ Ibrahim Bek crossed the Soviet-Afghan border in March 1929 with 600 fighters. Dzhunaid Khan returned from Iran in June 1929.

⁶² The Soviet authorities considered this an extension of the *Basmachi* resistance because of the presence of Ibrahim Bek, Dzhunaid Khan and some of the other Civil War *kurbashi*.

⁶³ It is difficult to know just how great this *Basmachi* threat to Soviet rule was because the topic of resistance to collectivization remains extremely sensitive and subject to strict censorship by the Soviet regime.

⁶⁴ The *OGPU* served as an 'army' of the Ministry of the Interior.

⁶⁵ Composed of Iomud Turkmen and Kazakhs who had fled to Turkmenistan following the destruction of their livestock. Polyakov and Chugunov, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

⁶⁶ At which time Dzhunaid Khan returned to Iran; he died there in 1936.

⁶⁷ They were obtained from Afghanistan or were captured from the Red forces or Austro-German prisoners of war who had been interned in Turkestan; finding ammunition and replacement parts was thus a serious problem.

⁶⁸ I have been able to find incomplete biographical data for 92 *kurbashi*: of these at least ten were from large landowning families, eight were mullahs and three were Ishans.

⁶⁹ P. S. Nazaroff, a Russian colonist in Turkestan, shared a jail cell with Dzhunaid Khan and as Nazaroff's description of the Turkmen leader is a sympathetic one Dzhunaid was probably not at all the 'barbaric' primitive depicted by the Soviet authorities. See P. S. Nazaroff, *Hunted Through Asia* (London, 1932), p. 26.

⁷⁰ The union of tribal leaders and bourgeois reformers was an unstable one but nonetheless they were able to lead concerted resistance against the Soviet regime.

⁷¹ Castagne, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁷² A. Kokanbaev, *Borba s Basmachestvom i uprochenie sovetskoi vlasti v Fergane* (Tashkent, 1958), p. 49.

⁷³ Castagne, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

⁷⁴ Sh. Dzhalinov, *Bor'ba s basmachestvom v Khodzhenском uезде* (Diushambe, 1968), p. 73.

⁷⁵ This was corroborated by an Afghan diplomat in Turkestan. Etherton, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

⁷⁶ Saidbaev, *op. cit.*, p. 142, reports that in 1923 90% of the communists in the BNSR were Muslim believers, and 10% of the members of the party in the KhNSR were Muslim clergy.

⁷⁷ Alexander Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union* (Chicago, 1978), pp. 38–39.

⁷⁸ One early Soviet analysis explains the *Basmachi* resistance as a struggle between the Turkestanian-dominated countryside and the Russian-dominated cities. See 'Basmachestvo i ferganskaya problema', *Zhizn' natsional'nostei*, 16 September 1921, p. 2.

⁷⁹ This is true even of the Turkestan communists who maintained an ambivalent attitude towards the *Basmachi*; although opposed to the resistance they sympathized with some of the *Basmachi* claims. This ambivalence was held against them during the purges of the 1930s.

⁸⁰ Poiyakov and Chugunov, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

⁸¹ Saidbaev, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁸² Ginzburg, *op. cit.*, p. 184.

⁸³ Dzhaililov, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁸⁴ G. Nepesov, *Iz istorii khorezmskoi revolyutsii 1920–1924 gg* (Tashkent, 1962), p. 264.

⁸⁵ Saidbaev, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ F. Khodzhaev, 'Revolyutsiya v Bukhare', *Izbrannye Trudy* (Tashkent, 1970), vol. 1, p. 232.

⁸⁸ For over 50 years the Soviet authorities have waged an unrelenting attack on the *Basmachi* in official history and literary accounts of the Civil War period. They seek to depict the *Basmachi* as brigands rather than the national heroes whom Castagne, *op. cit.* (p. 19) portrayed. The continued vociferous quality of the attack lends support to the conclusion that the *Basmachi* continue to hold a high place in folk history.

⁸⁹ Saidbaev, *op. cit.*, p. 150.