

LENIN AND SULTAN GALIEV - THE STRUGGLE FOR ISLAM IN THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION.

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Imagine if Vladimir Lenin had enlisted Muslim comrades to the Bolshevik party's Central Committee during the 1917 Russian Revolution, how different the history of the Soviet Union and even the world might have turned out. Today Muslims may still have been arguing about the pros and cons of Marxism in all its hues rather than debating extremist interpretations of jihad and sharia.

In fact there was an immensely popular and charismatic 'Muslim communist,' who for a short time became a member of the Soviet Communist Party and was revered by Lenin before being purged and executed by Stalin. Mir Said Sultan Galiev (1882-1940) advocated setting up an independent Muslim Communist Party and a Muslim Red Army to fight the European backed White armies and thereby secure the Revolution.

Galiev was the son of an impoverished Tartar schoolmaster born in a village near Kazan, today the capital of the Republic Tatarstan. Tartars are Turkic speaking people mainly of Mongol origin, who live in central Russia but are scattered all over the former Soviet Union. Galiev grew up poor. His father was incapable of feeding his twelve children. Nevertheless Galiev was already well read in Tartar, Russian and Arabic and had translated novels by Tolstoy into Tartar when he entered teacher's training school in Kazan.

By the time he graduated in 1911, he was reading revolutionary texts. He worked as a journalist and took part in Muslim nationalist politics. In 1917 he became a leading member of the Muslim Socialist Committee for Kazan and joined the Bolsheviks. He swiftly became the highest ranking Muslim in its hierarchy, occupying several top posts.

Lenin appointed him to the Central Muslim Commissariat and Chairman of the Military Collegium. In 1918 Galiev organized the defense of Kazan against the advancing White armies and recruited Muslims to the cause of the revolution. As a result Lenin and Stalin frequently sent him to eastern battle fronts against the Whites in order to raise the morale of Muslim divisions in the Red army and lead them to victory. All his life he remained immensely popular among Muslim and Russian communists.

Galiev became the architect of what he called 'Muslim national communism.' He advocated that the only guarantee against greater Russian chauvinism in the Bolshevik Communist Party was the creation of a separate Muslim communist party. He argued with Lenin that in the East (Asia) the nationalist struggle must supersede the class struggle because all Muslim colonized peoples were proletarians as all had all been oppressed by European or Tsarist colonialism.

Lenin firmly believed in Marx's thesis that the world revolution could only be won with the support of the European proletariat and the backward masses of the Muslim world were secondary. Galiev believed in reversing the order, stating that the revolution in the East would come first and undermine capitalism in the West making revolution possible there. However Lenin insisted on the primacy of the proletarian revolution in Europe. While Lenin tolerated Galiev, Stalin did not.

When the Bolsheviks held the First Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, Azerbaijan in 1920 in order to win support from the Muslim world, Galiev was refused permission to attend even though he had organized the meeting. Lenin's message to the Congress was clear. "It is self-evident that final victory can be won only by the proletariat of all the advanced countries of the world."

Galiev's most cogent idea was for a separate 'Muslim Red Army', which would be recruited on a populist leftist ideology rather than communism. The Army would be sensitive to Islamic traditions and so galvanize the majority of Muslims to fight for the Revolution.

He correctly warned that if the Bolsheviks did not do so the White Armies would recruit more Muslims to their cause.

Even though Galiev was an atheist himself, he believed that Marxism and Islam could co-exist, insisting that the CP use gradualism to educate the Muslim masses and slowly win them over to communism. Lenin refused to dilute the Marxist mantra, but needed Galiev's influence during the civil war.

By 1923 with Lenin seriously ill, Stalin accused Galiev of treason and conspiracy. Galiev was removed from the Party and arrested, as were all communists who believed in "Sultan-Galievism." He was freed briefly in 1924 and then rearrested in 1928 and sentenced to death in 1930 for 'nationalist deviation.' His sentence was commuted but he was finally shot on 28 January 1940, a victim of Stalin's purges during the early defeats of World War Two. Much of his written work, speeches and essays were destroyed.

Galiev's demands for greater decentralization and democracy within the Communist Party and greater sensitivity to Islam could have changed the attitude of millions of Muslims to the Revolution, especially in Central Asia. His ideas would have played an even bigger role in mobilizing for the defense of the Soviet Union after Hitler's invasion.

Significantly Galiev's ideas about initially implementing a populist rather than a communist armed struggle were later taken up by Mao Zedong in China especially during the famous Long March and Ho Chi Min in Vietnam.

Galiev remains a little known figure even amongst Russian and Central Asian Muslims today. On my frequent journeys to Central Asia since 1988 I have told Galiev's story to rapt Central Asian audiences who barely knew his name. He is not favored by today's autocratic Central Asian rulers and in the West the most dedicated research on him by Alexandre Benningsen and Enders Wimbush was published nearly forty years ago.

As Galiev had warned the Soviet failure in winning over the Muslims of Central Asia and the lack of a Muslim leadership to do, led to fierce anti-Soviet resistance which continued until the 1930's as a jihad against communism. As the Red Army moved into Central Asia, Jihadist movements led by Muslim tribal chiefs, mullahs, landlords and intellectuals sprang up in all the regions we know today as the separate states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The peoples of these states suffered staggering losses before, during and after the 1917 revolution.

In 1916 the whole of Central Asia had risen in revolt against the Tsar's attempts at forced recruitment into the Russian armies fighting World War 1. Terrible reprisals were carried out against the population if they failed to join up. The civil war after 1917 and the 1923 famine bled the people further. Millions more were killed as a result of the forced collectivization of the nomads and peasant farmers in the 1930s.

The Fergana valley was the heart of the anti-Soviet insurgency by the jihadis or, as the Russians called them derogatively Basmachis, meaning bandits. In Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan the narrow valley that cuts through each modern day state formed the bedrock of recruits for the insurgencies. Within a year the whole of Central Asia was aflame and Stalin made things worse by executing local party members and replacing them with Russians. A local Uzbek chief massacred Soviet troops in 1918 sparking off the flame of revolt in Uzbekistan.

In Tajikistan a landlord Igash Beg mobilized 20,000 fighters in guerrilla groups across the Fergana valley. Fighting continued until 1931 when the remaining rebels escaped into Afghanistan and Beg was captured and executed by the Red Army.

Between 1917-1920 the Kazakh nomads set up their own nationalist government called Alash Orda led by Ali Khan Bukeykanov, a prince and descendent of Genghis Khan . Despite their defeat at the hands of the Red Army, the Kazakh resistance continued even during the forced collectivization of their livestock in 1930. Scholars estimate that the Kazakhs lost 1.5 million people or one third of their population between 1917 and 1930.

In the deserts of Turkmenistan, the resistance by Turkmen nomadic cavalry on their famous Akhalteke breed of horses was long and fierce. The Turkmen had resisted Russian advances into their territory since 1880. In 1917 the tribes united behind a charismatic leader Mohammed Qurban Junaid Khan, a wealthy landlord and a judge of Islamic law. Khan led his last charge against the Red Army aged 70 in 1927.

The depopulation of Central Asia may have been avoided if Lenin and Stalin had listened to what Sultan Galiev was trying to convince them off - that millions of Muslims appreciated the end of Tsarist oppression and would fight for the Bolshevik message of "Peace, Bread and Land." However they could not immediately support an inflexible Marxist ideology that prevented them from being Muslim.

In the decades to come revolutionary leaders from Mao to Fidel Castro became much more flexible about how to interpret Marxism. The future success of every revolutionary movement depended on interpretation and innovation not dogged dogma. Yet some communists are still unable to give even temporary room to religion. China's terrible present day treatment of its Muslim Uighur population and Central Asia's autocrats restrictions on their Muslim populations are still cases in point.

If Galiev had been listened to today's Muslims could have been debating the future of Islam and socialism rather than global jihad and terrorism. Sultan Galiev was a heroic figures before his time.

The End.

This essay is extracted from Ahmed Rashid's 1994 book "The Resurgence of Central Asia, Islam or Nationalism? " Which has just been republished as a classic by the New York Review of Books. Ahmed Rashid is a journalist and writer who has written five books on Central Asia and Afghanistan.