

## STATUS OF SOVIET MOSLEMS

### Summary:

One of the myths of Soviet propaganda is the assertion that only the Western powers have been or are guilty of imperialism and colonialism. According to Soviet spokesmen, oppression of minorities, including the 25-million odd Moslems now under the Kremlin's direct rule, ended with the overthrow of the Tsarist empire. Their beliefs, customs, national and cultural institutions were "guaranteed" to be free and inviolable by such declarations as the proclamation addressed to "all Moslems toilers of Russia and the East" signed on 7 December 1917 by Lenin and Stalin. Contrary to the proclamation's assertions, however, the facts are not only that the USSR has been and is guilty of the repressive practices for which it castigates the old Tsarist regime but has even intensified them and created new ones.

The policies of the Stalin era resulted in the decimation of a whole generation of the Moslem's political and intellectual elite, the brutal break-up of the traditional nomadic tribal groups of Moslem minorities in Central Asia and the Caucasus and the complete destruction of the institutions and hierarchy of the Moslem religion. While a partial reestablishment of the Moslem religious hierarchy was permitted following the end of the Second World War the campaign against religious beliefs per se and the cultural identity of Moslem minorities continued relentlessly.

Following the death of Stalin tentative steps were taken to rectify some of the more obvious abuses in Stalin's policy. Moscow, however, has left no doubt that minority interests must continue to be subordinate to national policy and the basic goals of Stalin's policy are still valid.

### Treatment of Soviet Moslems Under Stalin:

Although Bolshevik theory originally rejected the concept of nationalism as a "bourgeois barrier to the growth of international proletarian culture," the political necessity at the time of the revolution of winning over minority elements forced some modification of this dogma. An attempt to resolve this contradiction between doctrine and the dictates of political reality gave rise to Stalin's ambiguous 1925 slogan defining Soviet culture as "national in form and socialist in content."

During the early years of the Soviet regime the "national in form" part of the slogan was liberally interpreted in Moslem areas and a flowering of minority cultures resulted. Elementary education expanded rapidly and national languages and art were developed. Cultural advance stimulated the growth of national consciousness, a development which the regime could not tolerate and conflict mounted between Moscow and the provinces. During the 1930's the Soviet Moslem population, as well as other minority areas, was struck by a series of blows from which the Moslems at least have not recovered. With the adoption of the Five Year Plan the Soviet regime took up a policy of rapid economic assimilation, and economic planning was for the first time centrally administered regardless of ethnic or regional peculiarities. Economic measures applied to the whole Soviet Union frequently became tools against local national spirit when implemented in the non-Russian areas. A case in point is the especially disastrous and crippling effects that agricultural collectivization had on the traditional social structure of the Central Asian minorities. Many of the Moslems led a nomadic life. For them collectivization involved not only confiscation of their property, as it did for the Russian peasants, but also the break-up of traditional tribal patterns and forceful settlement on the land. They resisted savagely and suffered losses greater than any single ethnic group in the Soviet Union. The Kazakhs alone suffered a population loss of well over one million.

The second blow was the offensive, launched simultaneously with collectivization, against Moslem culture. In the early 1930's thousands of mosques were closed, mullahs and other Islamic leaders arrested and the whole religious life brought to a standstill. To prevent a revival of religious life, the Soviet authorities forbade the use of the Arabic scripts for any purpose whatsoever, and imposed upon the whole population an artificial Latin alphabet later replaced in turn with a modified Russian one. The Soviet Moslems are to this day the only Moslems in the world not allowed the use of Arabic script and compelled to write their language in the alphabet of the conquering power.

The purpose of this policy was to cut off the Soviet Moslem population from its heritage as well as from all cultural contacts with Moslem communities abroad. The regime's fear of the development of any united Central Asian movement, either Pan-Turkic or Pan-Islamic, lies at the root of its entire policy towards its Central Asian colonies. The regime created five separate republics in this area often artificially exaggerating ethnic

differences. Moscow strove at all costs to prevent the formation of a single Turkic language by exploiting even the smallest dialectical differences among the various Turkic linguistic sub-groups. By administratively and linguistically isolating each group and by making the Russian language compulsory for all, the regime hoped eventually to establish Russian as the language of communication between Central Asian minorities and to relegate Turkic to the state of a peasant dialect.

The final blow to Moslem autonomy came with the purges of the late 1930's. The Central Asian republics were deprived of an entire generation of their own political leaders, economic experts and intellectuals. The healthy growth of the preceding decades was suddenly stunted and silence and suspicion replaced the confidence of the preceding era. The profound hatred of Moslems for the Soviet regime was demonstrated during World War II by the mass defection of Moslem troops and the collaboration with the Germans by the population of some Moslem-inhabited areas.

The end of the war brought a new stage in the onslaught against the Moslem minorities, this time in the form of a campaign to revise their histories. In the process past cultural and political ties with non-Soviet peoples were edited out of the history books. Popular epics glorifying the life and heroes of past eras were banned. The new histories which emerged showed only a "long, friendly and progressive association with the Great Russian people and its culture." The slogan "national in form, socialist in content" now came to be interpreted officially as meaning a single Russified culture merely translated into the local language.

#### Current Status

Following the death of Stalin tentative steps were taken to rectify some of the more obvious abuses in Stalin's policies. Police control was relaxed, living conditions were slowly improved and, in the cultural sphere, a slightly wider degree of national expression was tolerated. Some of the Central Asian leaders purged in the 1930's were posthumously rehabilitated. Similarly, a further easing of the regime's policy towards the Moslem religion has become evident. In general, greater emphasis is now placed on the unifying force of "socialist culture" with less stress on its purely Russian aspects. While Moscow has allowed some liberalization in cultural activity, it has left no

doubt that minority interests must continue to be subordinated to national policy.

Khrushchev's virgin land program, for instance, appears to be the final step in suppressing Kazakh national life. The influx of Russian and other non-Kazakh settlers into Kazakhstan in connection with this program has been so great that ethnic Kazakhs are now far outnumbered in their own republic. After the purge of Moslem national leaders in the 1930's the Soviet regime attempted to maintain the facade of native rule by placing trusted Moslem nationals in the top party and government positions, giving them Russian deputies who actually held the reins of power. Following the inauguration of the virgin land program even this pretense was abandoned in Kazakhstan and officials from outside the republic are now being imported in increasing numbers to staff important positions at all levels.

Signs of serious discontent over the influx of Russians and the Soviet nationality policy in general came to light in Kazakhstan in early 1957. According to the Soviet press, "false and pernicious" articles appeared in certain literary journals complaining that: 1) specialists not knowing the Kazakh language were brought in to work in all branches of the Kazakh economy. 2) the interests and wishes of Kazakh workers were being ignored. 3) Kazakh nationalists had been intimidated; 4) entrance examinations for Kazakh higher educational institutions were only given in the Russian language thus preventing many Kazakh youths from gaining admission.

While the other Central Asian republics have not been subjected to the same degree of Russian immigration, anti-Russian sentiment, particularly among the intellectuals, appears to exist in all republics. Western travellers have gained the impression from talking to local inhabitants that there is considerable resentment of Russian domination and Russian suppression of the national aspirations among most of the national minorities.

Close as Moscow's control is over the Central Asian republics it is still not always completely effective. There are indications that some native leaders, in Turkmenistan at least, apparently taking advantage of the more relaxed atmosphere in Moscow, have been attempting to champion local nationalist sentiment. Recently Moscow ousted the three top native party and government officials in Turkmenistan on charges of "national exclusiveness and chauvinism" and attempting to discriminate against Russians in job appointments.

Since the Second World War the Soviet regime has abandoned direct repression of the Moslem religion and religious leaders. This change has come about partly because of the regime's belief that as old believers die religion will die out with them and partly from deference to foreign policy considerations, particularly the current campaign to woo the Arab nations. The result is a curious mixture of official forbearance and resolute atheism. The Soviet radio beams to the Middle East countries protestations of the vitality and freedom of the Moslem religion within the USSR while simultaneously, the home service radio is viciously attacking the Islamic religion and claiming its quick demise.

After the war the regime permitted the reestablishment of the Moslem religious hierarchy and the reopening of some Mosques. At best, however, this amounts to only a facade, for the influence of Soviet schools, radio and newspapers is continuously directed against religion. Organizationally there are four "spiritual departments" of the Moslem religious hierarchy, one each for Central Asia, the Trans-Caucasus, the North Caucasus and the Far Eastern part of the Soviet Union. To prevent the development of Pan-Islamic sentiment, however, virtually no contact is permitted among the four groups.

From the time of the communist incorporation of the Moslem areas in the mid-1920's, until 1957 no copies of the Koran were printed. The government then permitted only 3,000 copies to be issued. There have been reported to be only 16 mosques open in Tashkent, a city with a population of over a million, and no more than 200 mosques in the entire Central Asian area.

There are now two Moslem religious schools; one was opened in 1946, the other more recently. Again, however, a total of only 30 priests have been turned out.