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The Basmachi Movement in Soviet Central Asia

(A Study in Political Development)

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FOREWORD

This was a liberation movement of the Russian Turkistani Muslims. The struggle to stop the Soviet's onslaught on Russian Turkistan was spread over a period of 1918-1931. This was not a locally confined reaction of a few disgruntled Amirs of the il-Khanates as the Russians would make us believe. It involved Soviet Russia soon after the October Revolution to the extent of bringing it on the verge of open confrontation with British India. It also dragged Afghanistan and Turkey in the field as they could not escape the effects of the 20th century Soviet Forward Policy as they were in the near vicinity of the melting pot of Central Asia.

Besides the certain local individual pseudo-progressive Committees of labourers and peasants, the Basmachi Movement also confronted the *Jadidists* (Modernists), Young Khivans and Young Bukharans. To the so-called modernist movements arising in the wake of the present day Sovietization specially of Afghanistan, the remnants of the Basmachi Movement still hold their own and serve as a guide and lesson to the Afghans in their present struggle against the Soviet occupation of their father land.

The Basmachi Movement, an eventful political phenomenon, was the first and last struggle of the Central Asian Muslims against Russian 'imperialism and colonialism.' The rank and file of the Movement were out to stop the Sovietization of their land and people, and to keep preserved their rights of self-determination and sovereignty. Their culture was at

stake first at the hands of the Russians and then the Soviets. Naturally with them it was question of life and death. Hence their struggle for physical and cultural survival. Although they could not succeed in preventing the moving wheel of the Soviet Juggernaut in their fatherland yet it was their tough opposition that still haunts the soviets in the Muslim part of U.S.S.R.

The most striking feature of the Basmachi Movement is its relevance to the present-day resistance movement of the Afghan Mujahideen for the freedom of their father-land and restoration of their self-determination. Seen in historical perspective the Basmachi Movement is a beacon pole for the Afghan freedom fighters because in its rise and fall there are glaring similarities between the two. The common ground of the two resistance movements of the same spiritual stock to the same imperialist power is so identical that a mere change of the dramatis personae would make the one look like the other. Even their points of strength and weakness are just similar.

In order to understand the scope and character of the present resistance movement in its true letter and spirit one has got to study the past resistance movement against Bolshevism and Communism. That is why Abdul Jabbar Sabith, a Research Associate of the Area Study Centre (Central Asia), University of Peshawar, and Abdullah Toura, another Research Associate of the same Centre, translated the book in Dari (Afghan Persian) and Uzbaki languages respectively. The Dari translation is entitled "Tarikh-i-Islam-i-Wa-Melli Mussalmanan-i-Asia-i-Miyana Dar

(iii)

Muqabil-i-Communism-i-Rus" (A History of the Islamic and Nationalist Struggle of the Central Asian Muslims Against Russian Communism). The two Translations made really good reading in their respective spheres.

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P R E F A C E

The Socio-cultural relations between Central Asia and Indo-Pak Sub-Continent have been that of the feeder and the fed. Most of the medieval Muslim Indian rulers were of Central Asian stock. Throughout the history, men and movements slipped down the slope from Central Asia to India. The tremors of political developments in Central Asia even now shake the heads and hearts of Indo-Pak leaders. Hence a natural corollary that we could not remain uninfluenced by the Russian advance in Central Asia.

The great power rivalry in Central Asia have already affected us. The wheel of history is still in motion, and we are obliged to appreciate the span and speed of this Juggernaut's wheel. In its very first two decades the Soviet Revolution set in motion and devoured Central Asian principalities one by one. It was the lot of Afghanistan to be its most recent prey. The wheel is too near to be overlooked. The geo-political situation of Pakistan in the land mass of Asia necessitates an intimate knowledge and correct appraisal of dynamics and their resultant situation obtainable in our immediate neighbourhood.

Prior to the Soviets advance it was during the Tsarist domination that as many as fifteen large scale rebellions—religio-political movements—emerged in the area. However, the bitterest and trying times of the local people came under the Bolsheviks. To fulfil their communist objectives, the Soviet dubbed every thing that ran counter to their policy as anti-communist, bourgeoisie, reactionary and anti-revolutionary

and ultimately crushed it. When they imposed the Communist Revolution in Turkestan and began depriving the Turkestani Muslims of their religious, political and socio-cultural freedom, the latter rose in rebellion and open defiance against the Soviets. Their resistance movement, known as the Basmachi Movement, was the first ever against Bolshevism and Communism. For nearly thirteen years it held its own against most severe conditions. Why and how this Movement emerged and came to an end is the study of this book. Some technical obstacles concerning the study of Russia require comments. The change from the old style calendar to the Gregorian was made by the Soviet government on February 1, 1918. Many authors, however, both Soviet and Western, date the New style from the day of the Soviet up-heaval; others, with January 1, 1918. Russian documents of 1917-1921 written in areas not occupied by the Soviets were still dated in the old style. These discrepancies inevitably contribute, to some confusion, and occasional errors in dating are difficult to avoid. For the sake of simplicity, I have used the old style through December 31, 1917, and the New Style beginning with January 14, 1918 the first 13 days of that month being cancelled by the Calendars shift.

F.R.K.M.
Peshawar, 1984

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F. R. K. M.

Dated: 27th April, 1984.

THE EMERGENCE OF BASMACHI MOVEMENT

Jehad is an element of Faith.

(Al Bukhari)

On the eve of the October Socialist Revolution the Russian Central Asia* consisted of (i) the emirate of Bukhara, which under the treaties signed with Russia on May 11, 1868¹ and September 28, 1873² was virtually reduced to the status of a protectorate, (ii) the Khanate of Khiva, whose Khan by the treaty of August 12, 1873 had declared himself a “faithful servant of the Russian Emperor” a proe’ge’ ruler³ and (ii) the Governor Generalship of Turkestan.

The Revolution inter-alia posed many administrative and ideological problems to the new rulers of Russia. The whole concept of empire in the first instance ran counter to communist theory, but its retention was also necessary. Secondly, Britain was posing permanent problem and any evasiveness in Central Asia would jeopardize Russia’s security. Thirdly, a large number of Russians over two millions had settled for good in the Kazak Steppe region and in other parts of Central Asia which all the more necessitated strong and rigorous policy in the area. And, therefore, communism was presented to the people of Central Asia as a panacea,

*The terms Central Asia and Turkestan are used synonymously in this study.

guaranteeing them freedom, independence with material satisfaction.

Since the establishment of Soviet rule, the Central Asian Muslims realized that "the revolution was a Russian Revolution. It was Russian not only in the sense that it took place in Russia, but also in that it was carried out by people who were Russians in the ethnical or cultural sense."⁴ Lenin was himself a Russian in whom, "inspite of his international attitude, there was probably as strong a messianic strain as in any Tsarist statesman."⁵ It was also a difficult task for the Soviet Government to implement its policy in Turkestan⁶ because the bulk of the population in the former Tsarist colonial border regions was 'illiterate*.' National narrow-mindedness and isolation, accompanied by superstition and prejudice, were wide spread among the population. Minor religious differences, fanned by priests for their own selfish ends, also made for hostility between nations and groups. Muslims in turn regarded Christians as "infidels" who defiled their holy land.

"Lenin thus became the founder of the second Russian imperialism," says Muhammad Emin Bugra, "If there be any difference in terms of atrocity between him and Ivan, the Terrible (1533—1584), the founder of Tsarist Russian imperialism, it lies in the fact that Ivan perpetrated his brutality under "cross" while Lenin did it under "Hammer and Sickles."⁷

Of all the forms of the anti-Soviet struggle on the territory of the Soviet Union, the Basmachi Movement in Soviet Central Asia has strongest life. Among Turkestani

*They were illiterate in the sense that Muslim populace preferred to read in the traditional customary schools attached with Mosques instead of Russian schools.

nationalists, "the Basmachi Movement is known as the Bek or freemen's movement (*Beklar Haraketi*)."⁸ Etymologically "Basmalchi," is derived from the Turkish verb "Basmak" meaning "to Press", "oppress", "violate". Hence, in the Uzbek language "Basmachi" means "bandit", robber", violator". And this word, which does not correspond either in idea or meaning to the conception it has come to imply, now designates a wide anti-Soviet movement in Turkestan.

However strange it may seem, this word "Basmachi" has lost, even in Turkestan it-self (of course in a non-Soviet camp), its original offensive meaning, and has become a synonym of the nationalistic rebel – the active participant in the armed anti-Soviet struggle. It has come to have the same meaning as the Arabic word *Mujahid* so extensively used in the Muslim world, and thus the October Revolution has taken a low word "Basmachi" (a bandit) to mean "*Mujahid*" – the holy warrior.⁹

Among the causes of Basmachi movement were: the thwarted desire of the native peoples to exercise the promised right of self-determination, the repressive and irresponsible policies of the Soviet Government, economic crisis and the steadily deepening famine. The practical policy of the Soviet authorities was of a purely negative character. They even did not hesitate to impose a hunger blockade on the people of Turkestan in pursuance of their policy of force. While in one part of Turkestan a famine occurred on account of the failure of the harvest, another part of the country, connected by rail with the famine district, had abundant stores of grain. "The victims numbered 800,000 according to official statements. These figures are of particular significance for Mohammadans, as not a single Russian was among the victims. And this tragedy took place whilst the most productive grain district in Turkestan was in the "hands of the Bolsheviks."¹⁰

Another measure against the Turkestani Muslims was the agrarian policy of the Bolsheviks. It was based on definitely imperialistic lines and is particularly significant in this connection. The country was taken from the native population and divided among the Bolshevik officials. The Soviet rulers explained this policy by the argument that the "Proletarian dictatorship"¹¹ in Turkestan can only be assumed by a Russian."¹² Systematic raids were authorised to seize the cattle and cotton, which was sent to Central Russia. "The reply of the peasants to these forceful proceedings was to reduce the growth of cotton and the raising of cattle to a minimum."¹³

As such the imperialistic measures and in-human behaviour of Bolshevik authorities compelled poor peasants to take arms against them. Among Muslims, every-where in Turkestan the calculated callousness of the Soviet regime stirred revulsion, hatred, and despair. "Will the Russian freedom never come to an end?" became a whispered question in every native village and town.¹⁴ The dichotomy between the old and new cities, between the Muslim country side and the Russian town, sharpened into open hostility and burst into armed opposition, into the native guerrilla warfare which became known as Basmachism.¹⁵

Basmachi Movement was strongly influenced and shaped by other developments and forces inside and outside the region, including Pan-Islamism,¹⁶ Pan-Turkism,¹⁷ Pan-Turanism,¹⁸ Tatar intellectuals, *Usuli-Jadid Movement*,¹⁹ The Persian Revolution of 1906,²⁰ The Young Turks Revolution of 1908,²¹ Menshevik propaganda and Bolsheviks anti-Islam measures.

Bolshevik policy toward nationalities had been codified in April, 1917 at the Seventh Social Democratic Party

Congress, which recognized the right of nationalities in the empire to choose their destiny, even if this choice involved a final separation from Russia. Yet, the Bolshevik assumption of power changed little of the character assumed by the revolution in Central Asia since its beginning, "it was apparent that the Revolution in Turkestan followed a colonial direction."²³

"Just as the revolution there had been Russian", says Edward Allworth, "the power there was at first resolutely Russian. Drawn up in opposition to it, indigenous groups, who were definitely disappointed, could choose either local governments or cooperation with an authority which habitually rejected them." Also rising up in opposition to "the Bolshevik regime were Russians hostile to the revolution who tried to base their counter-revolutionary activities on the indigenous movements in rebellion."²⁴ Both Soviet and Western writers agree that Basmachi Movement's origin stemmed from Tashkent's initial exclusion of Muslims from governmental posts and its later extermination of the Khokand Autonomous Government. Alexander G. Park observes, "Even these acts might not have engendered the rise of a movement as elemental as Basmachism had the Soviet regime not pursued its policies with a savagery and callousness which drove nearly all natives first into opposition and later into armed defence of their lives and property."²⁵

According to Mustafa Chokaev*, it should be noted that this second conquest of Central Asia by the Russian

*Mustafa Chokaev (or Mustafa Chokay—Oghlu) (1890-1941) was President of the Provisional Government of Autonomous Turkestan which was elected by the Extra-ordinary Congress of Turkestan Mussulmans in November, 1917 and which was suppressed as a result of the bombardment of Khokand by troops of the Tashkent Sovnarkom on January 31, 1918.

troops has cost both sides far more than its first conquest in the second half of the last century: and this notwithstanding the fact that during the half century of Russian rule the Muslim population of Turkestan had lost all potentiality for organising resistance, and that the Russian had succeeded within the same period in instilling into us the fear of their might. This power of resistance of the amorphous mass of the Muslim population can be explained by two causes: "firstly, by the relative growth of national consciousness since the period of the independent Khanates; and secondly and more particularly, by the strength of the instinct of self-preservation."²⁶ He further says, "It is a fact, indeed, that none of the so-called imperialistic conquests" of other nations have been so rich in victims at the expense of the conquered colony as the first two years of the Soviet dictatorship in Turkestan, when the theory that "the bearer of the dictatorship of the proletariat here can only be Russian^{*} was openly practised."²⁷ This exceptional and un-precedented anti-national and non-class severity of the Soviet regime in Central Asia was the only and undisputed cause of the birth of the Basmachi movement among the Muslims.

Almost all western writers agree and have one and the same opinion about the following points :

(1) The Socialist Revolution in Turkestan constituted nothing more than "colonial expansion." This is "proved" by assuming that since internal preconditions for revolution were absent in Turkestan and revolution was a phenomenon alien to the native population, it could only have been exported from the centre, that is, from petrograd and Moscow, and was carried out by the Russians in their own interests;

^{*}See the Moscow Pravda, June 20, 1920.

(ii) The "Russian" Soviet government crushed the liberation movement of the peoples of Turkestan and all manifestations of national independence. The collapse of the "Khokand autonomy" which was supposed to have expressed the national aspirations of the native population, and the struggle with the Basmachi movement are adduced as "evidence" for this assertion;

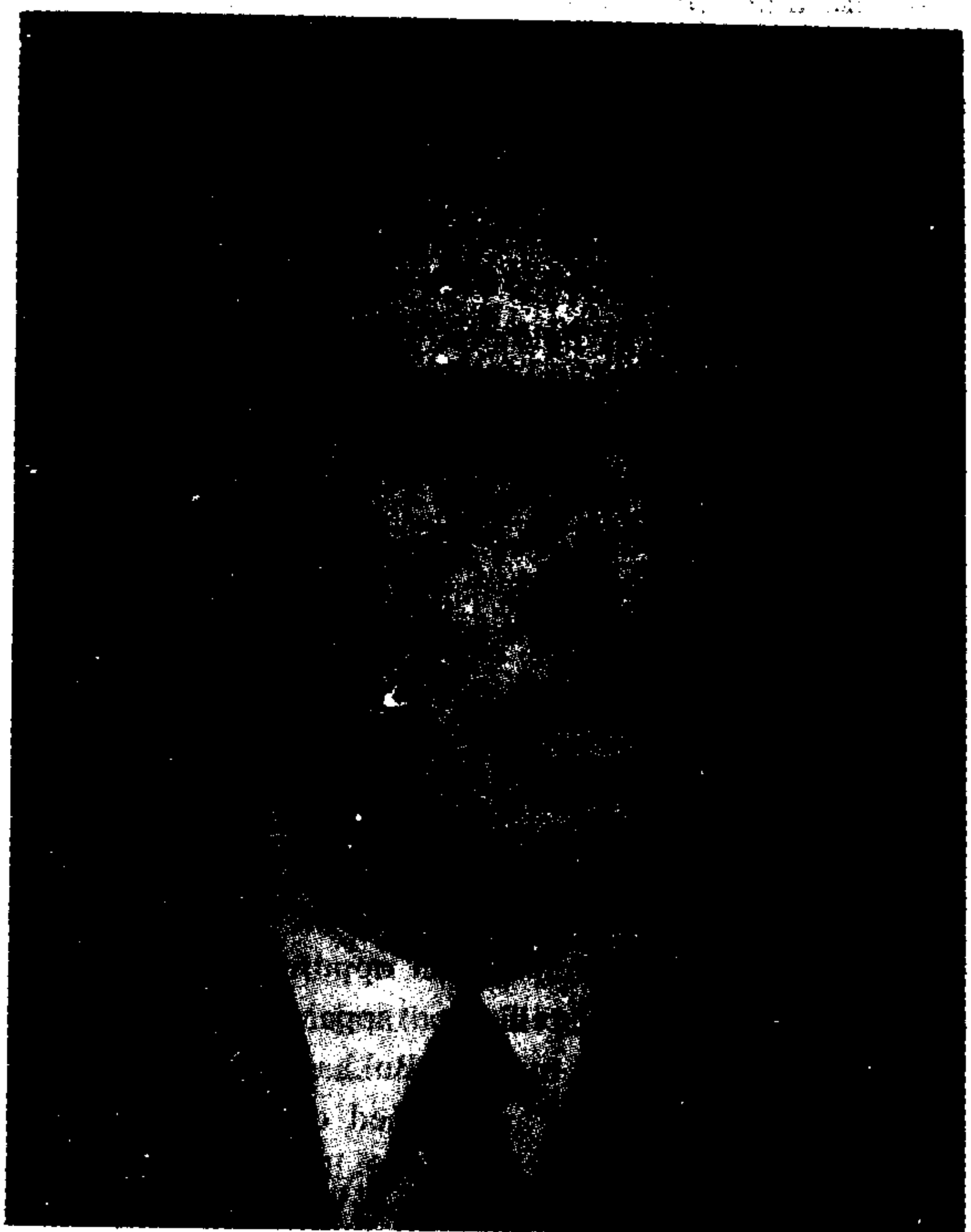
(iii) The Economic and cultural policy of the Soviet government has from the very beginning been "colonial" and directed against the interests of the peoples of Turkestan.²⁸

In the investigation of the causes of the emergence of the Basmachi Movement, the Soviet writers make a long excursion into the sphere of "Imperialistic exploitation of the Muslim population of Turkestan under the old regime." The extension of 'cotton growing'²⁹ in Central Asia resulted in the impoverishment of the native peasantry and the Tsar's artificial interference with the development of a native industry which might have absorbed the surplus village population caused the arising of bands of desperate peasants who, having no other option, took to brigandage and crime. "Those peasant-brigands were one type of social phenomenon often referred to as Basmachi. Their sole purpose was to steal enough money and goods to keep themselves and their families from starvation. Though symptomatic of a profound economic and social maladjustment, their activities had absolutely no conscious political import."³⁰

The other social phenomenon covered by the same term is also a form of brigandage, "but belongs in its inception to the post-revolutionary period, and is rooted, not in the peasantry, but in combination of the native bourgeois*, feudal and clerical elements disinherited by the Revolution."³¹

*By Bourgeois is meant the class of modern capitalists, owners of the means of social production and employers of wage labour.

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