

SOVIET CULTURAL POLICY IN UZBEKISTAN: ESSENCE,
STAGES, AND CONSEQUENCES

Mengdobilova Mavluda Qarshiyevna

History Teacher at the Academic Lyceum of Chirchiq State
Pedagogical University

Abstract. *This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the cultural policy carried out by Soviet authorities in the territory of Uzbekistan during the period from 1917 to 1991. The study examines the campaign to eliminate illiteracy conducted under the slogan of “cultural revolution,” alphabet reforms (the transition from Arabic script to Latin and subsequently to Cyrillic), the repression of national intellectuals, atheistic upbringing, and the ideological measures aimed at forming the concept of “the Soviet people.” The dual nature of this policy is also examined in a comparative manner – on the one hand, the development of mass education, science, and the arts; on the other hand, the suppression of national identity, religious values, and historical memory. The findings demonstrate that Soviet cultural policy produced profound transformations in the spiritual life of the Uzbek people, the consequences of which are still felt during the process of national self-restoration in the years of independence.*

Keywords: *Soviet cultural policy, cultural revolution, elimination of illiteracy, alphabet reform, repression, Jadidism, national intelligentsia, atheism, ideology, Uzbek SSR, national identity.*

Introduction

The twentieth century was a century of fundamental changes in the history of Uzbekistan. The October Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent establishment of Soviet rule brought about radical transformations not only in the political and economic spheres but also in every stratum of cultural life. In order to achieve its ideological objectives, the Bolshevik authorities regarded culture as one of the principal ideological instruments and proceeded to reshape it on the basis of the principle of “socialist in content, national in form.”

Soviet cultural policy in Uzbekistan possessed a multifaceted and contradictory character. On the one hand, it produced notable positive achievements: the elimination of mass illiteracy, the expansion of a network of secular schools, the establishment of institutions of higher education, and the development of national theatre, cinema, science, and literature. On the other hand, negative processes also took place: the repression of the national intelligentsia, the trivialization of historical memory, the ruthless campaign against religion, and the radical reinterpretation of traditional family and moral values.

The aim of this article is to systematically analyze the main directions, stages, mechanisms, and consequences of the cultural policy implemented in Uzbekistan during the Soviet period. The second section of the article presents a review of the sources and literature relevant to the topic. The third section examines in detail the content of Soviet cultural policy. The fourth section is devoted to results and discussion. The final section presents the conclusions.

Literature Review

The topic of Soviet cultural policy and its specific features in the territory of Uzbekistan has been studied by both foreign and local historians using a

variety of approaches. In Soviet historiography, this issue was treated primarily from a class-based and party-oriented perspective, with the achievements of the “cultural revolution” being portrayed in exaggerated terms. The works of M. Vahobov, Kh. Inoyatov, and other Soviet historians glorified the processes of eliminating illiteracy and constructing the educational system carried out by the Bolsheviks, while questions of repression and the damage inflicted on national culture were passed over in silence.

During the years of independence, new approaches to this topic have emerged in Uzbek historiography. In the studies of R. Shamsutdinov, Q. Rajabov, D. Alimova, N. Karimov, and other scholars, the ideological essence of Soviet cultural policy, the complex relations between the Jadid movement and the Soviet authorities, and the impact of the period of repression in 1937–1938 on cultural life have been examined in an objective manner. D. Alimova’s studies on the history of Jadidism and Q. Rajabov’s works on the Turkestan Autonomy and Soviet administration are of considerable significance in this field.

In Western Oriental studies, the works of A. Khalid, D. Northrop, M. Kamp, and A. Edgar are particularly noteworthy. In his monograph *Making Uzbekistan* (2015), A. Khalid analyzes the formation of Uzbek national identity during the Soviet period and the complex interactions between the Jadids and the Soviet system. In *Veiled Empire* (2004), D. Northrop examines the “hujum” campaign launched in 1927 – the mass unveiling of women – from gender and anthropological perspectives. M. Kamp’s studies on the question of women provide a deep analysis of the impact of Soviet cultural policy on the family and on the status of women. Regarding alphabet reforms and language policy, the works of W. Fierman, B. Grenoble, and S. Akiner constitute important

sources. They demonstrate that the transition from Arabic script to Latin in 1929, and from Latin to Cyrillic in 1940, was not accidental but rather an integral component of Moscow's centralized language policy. These reforms had the effect of severing an entire generation from the written heritage of its ancestors.

The questions of the anti-religious campaign and atheistic upbringing during the Soviet period have been analyzed in the studies of Sh. Keller, A. Babadjanov, and B. Babadjanov. Their research, conducted on the basis of local archival documents, provides a detailed account of the closure of mosques, the repression of the ulama, and the gradual elimination of Islamic practice from public life. These sources serve as the theoretical and empirical foundation of the present article.

Analysis and Results

The Concept of "Cultural Revolution" and Its Stages

The concept of "cultural revolution" (Russian: «культурная революция») was introduced into scholarly discourse by V. I. Lenin in his 1923 work *On Cooperation*. According to Bolshevik theory, the construction of a socialist society required not only the creation of a material base but also a fundamental transformation of the consciousness of the working people, with the aim of forming "a new type of human being" – the Soviet person. This process consisted of eliminating illiteracy, expanding secular education, placing science and the arts at the service of socialism, and liberating society from "old ideological remnants" – namely religiosity, traditional customs, and "bourgeois nationalism."

The cultural policy in Uzbekistan can be conditionally divided into the following stages: the first stage – 1917-1928, the period of the establishment of

Soviet rule and the initial reforms; the second stage – 1929-1941, the most active phase of the “cultural revolution,” marked by repressions and alphabet reforms; the third stage – 1941-1953, the wartime and postwar period of intensified ideological control; the fourth stage – 1953-1985, the period of relative liberalization (the “thaw”) followed by stagnation; and the fifth stage – 1985-1991, the period of perestroika and the crisis of the Soviet system.

Elimination of Illiteracy and the Educational System

At the moment the Soviet authorities came to power, the literacy rate in the territory of Uzbekistan stood at around 2-4 percent (according to official Soviet statistics). On December 26, 1919, the decree “On the Elimination of Illiteracy among the Peoples of the Russian Federation” was adopted. In Turkestan, this campaign was implemented under the name “Likbez” (Russian: «ликвидация безграмотности»).

Significant achievements were attained in this direction: by 1939, the share of literate people in the Uzbek SSR reached 78.7 percent, and by 1959 it had effectively reached 99 percent. A network of new schools was established, and hundreds of vocational schools, technical colleges, and institutions of higher education were opened. In 1920, Turkestan State University (the present-day National University of Uzbekistan) was founded, followed by Tashkent State Pedagogical Institute and the institutes of agriculture and medicine.

However, behind these achievements there lay a number of contradictions. First, traditional schools and madrasas were forcibly closed and replaced by secular schools, which resulted in the disappearance of religious educational traditions and of the scholarly heritage in Arabic. Second, the content of education was placed under strict ideological control: history,

literature, and the social sciences were taught within the framework of Marxist-Leninist methodology. Third, the experience of the Jadid schools — the *usul-i savtiya* method — was rejected by Soviet pedagogy as “bourgeois-nationalist ideology,” and its founders were subjected to repression.

Alphabet Reforms and Language Policy

One of the most complex issues of Soviet cultural policy, with consequences lasting for generations, was the question of the alphabet. The Uzbek people had used a script based on Arabic graphics for centuries. In 1929, at the Samarkand congress, an official transition was made from the Arabic alphabet to the Latin alphabet. Although this change was initially interpreted as a progressive step, in practice it severed the Uzbek people from their centuries-old written heritage: within a single generation, manuscripts in libraries, *waqf* documents, *divans*, and epic poems became unreadable texts for the majority of their descendants.

In 1940, after only eleven years, a further transition was decreed – this time from the Latin to the Cyrillic alphabet. This new change was officially carried out under the pretext of “strengthening the friendship of peoples” and “bringing the languages closer to Russian.” In reality, it was a strategic step aimed at communicatively isolating the Turkic peoples of the Soviet Union from one another and from Turkey and other countries that used the Latin alphabet.

Russian was introduced as the dominant *lingua franca* in the spheres of state administration, science, and higher education. Members of the local intelligentsia waged struggles to preserve and develop their mother tongue: writers such as A. Qodiriy, Cho‘lpon, Fitrat, and A. Qahhor made enormous

contributions to preserving and enriching the Uzbek language. However, the majority of them fell victim to the repressions.

National Intellectuals and the Era of Repression

On the eve of the establishment of Soviet rule, the Jadid movement – a movement of intellectuals embodying the ideas of modernism, national awakening, and reformism – was widely active in Turkestan. Such thinkers as Mahmudkhoja Behbudiy, Munavvarqori Abdurashidxonov, Abdurauf Fitrat, Abdulhamid Cho‘lpon, Abdulla Qodiriy, and Usmonxo‘ja Po‘latxo‘jayev initially attempted to cooperate with the Soviet authorities, since they recognized a certain common ground on issues such as secular education, women’s rights, and modernization.

However, by the end of the 1920s, the tension between the Jadids and the Bolsheviks intensified considerably. The Jadids’ ideas regarding national identity, religious values, and Turkic unity were entirely incompatible with Soviet ideology. In 1937–1938, the period of the “Great Terror” began: under the labels of “enemies of the people,” “Pan-Turkists,” “nationalists,” “counter-revolutionaries,” and “spies,” the finest representatives of the Uzbek people were shot or perished in Siberian camps. F. Xo‘jayev, A. Ikromov, A. Qodiriy, A. Cho‘lpon, A. Fitrat, and thousands of other intellectuals lost their lives during this period.

These repressions dealt a tremendous blow to Uzbek culture. The most talented representatives of an entire generation were destroyed, their works were banned, and their names were condemned to oblivion. Only during the “thaw” of 1956 and later, in the years of independence, were their names rehabilitated and their works restored to the people.

Atheistic Upbringing and Its Impact on Traditional Values

Another important direction of Soviet cultural policy was the struggle against religion. According to Marxist ideology, religion was “the opium of the people” and had to be eliminated in the process of building a socialist society. In Uzbekistan, this struggle was directed against Islam and was carried out along several lines.

First, mosques were closed on a mass scale: whereas in 1917 more than 26,000 mosques had been functioning in Turkestan, by 1941 their number had been reduced to several hundred. Many mosques were converted into warehouses, clubs, or museums. Second, the ulama, mudarrises, and imam-khatibs were persecuted; many were executed or exiled. Third, the performance of religious rites – prayer, fasting, and the hajj – became practically impossible, while for party members and intellectuals any form of religious activity was entirely prohibited.

The “hujum” campaign launched in 1927 – the movement to abandon the paranji – was carried out under the pretext of liberating women from the traditional way of life. On the one hand, this campaign opened the way for women to obtain an education, pursue professional careers, and participate in public life. On the other hand, it had a coercive and at times bloody character: women who refused to discard the paranji were subjected to family pressure, public condemnation, and even physical violence. As D. Northrop has demonstrated, in Uzbekistan this campaign became intertwined not only with questions of gender but also with the hidden forms of preserving national identity.

Literature, the Arts, and Science: Achievements and Limitations

During the Soviet period, undeniable achievements were registered in literature, theatre, cinematography, music, and the visual arts in Uzbekistan.

Such poets and writers as Gʻafur Gʻulom, Oybek, Hamid Olimjon, Mirtemir, Asqad Muxtor, Erkin Vohidov, and Abdulla Oripov elevated Uzbek literature to new heights. Hamza Hakimzoda Niyoziy and Komil Yashin became among the founders of the national theatre based on Hamza's artistic legacy. Such directors as Kamil Yormatov and Shuhrat Abbosov shaped the Uzbek cinematographic tradition. Composers such as Muxtor Ashrafiy, Toxtasin Jalilov, and To'ra Sodiqov created new strata of national music.

Significant achievements were also recorded in the field of science: in 1943, the Academy of Sciences of the Uzbek SSR was established, and world-class scientific schools were formed in physics, mathematics, chemistry, biology, Oriental studies, and history. The scholarly activity of figures such as T. Sarimsoqov, S. Sirojiddinov, U. Orifov, Ya. Gʻulomov, and I. Mo'minov constitutes one of the brightest pages of the scientific life of that period.

However, this creative activity was conducted under strict ideological control. The method of "socialist realism" was established as the sole correct orientation in literature and the arts. Themes, characters, and ideological direction had to fit within a narrow framework determined in advance by the Party. Topics related to national history, Sufi and mystical literature, and the work of religious scholars were either passed over in silence or characterized as "reactionary." The critical attacks directed at the epic Alpomish, as well as at Yassaviy, Navoiy, and other classical authors during 1951-1953, serve as vivid illustrations of this practice.

The Concept of the "Soviet People" and National Identity

In the 1960s and 1970s, within the framework of the CPSU program, the concept of "the Soviet people as a new historical community" was elevated into official ideology. According to this concept, a new type of nation – the "Soviet

person,” united on the basis of a common socialist ideology regardless of nationality, language, or religion – was supposedly being formed in the Soviet Union. In practice, however, this concept represented a softened version of the policy of Russification and led to national culture and language being relegated to a secondary status.

At the same time, in accordance with the Constitution of the Uzbek SSR, the development of the Uzbek language and culture was officially guaranteed. The training of national cadres and the development of national literature and arts continued. However, the dominance of the Russian language increasingly intensified in higher education, science, and the upper echelons of state administration. As a result, a bilingual stratum of intellectuals emerged – one that was, in many cases, more deeply attuned to Russian culture.

Conclusion

The cultural policy carried out in Uzbekistan during the Soviet era left a complex and contradictory imprint on the history of the Uzbek people. On the one hand, illiteracy was practically eliminated during this period, significant development was observed in the spheres of higher education, science, literature, theatre, cinema, and music, women were widely drawn into public life, and the processes of urbanization and modernization were accelerated.

On the other hand, the price paid for these achievements was extremely high. The brightest representatives of the national intelligentsia were repressed, the traditional educational system and religious culture were destroyed, and as a result of the alphabet reforms the people were severed from their centuries-old written heritage. Historical memory was diluted, national identity was placed under the pressure of Russification, the ideology of “socialist realism”

restricted creative freedom, and the struggle against religion inflicted serious damage on the spiritual foundations of the nation.

The measures implemented in the years of independence – the rehabilitation of the victims of repression, the restoration of national values, the change of alphabet, and the reconstruction of historical memory – are all precisely actions aimed at overcoming the consequences of Soviet cultural policy. The thorough scholarly analysis of this process is of vital importance for the understanding of historical truth by both present and future generations. Future research, based on local archival documents, oral history sources, and comparative methods of analysis, should be directed at exploring in greater depth such sensitive topics as the regional peculiarities of Soviet cultural policy, its impact on family life, the policies concerning women and youth, and the attitude toward the culture of smaller ethnic groups.

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