Double Burden and Double Consciousness:
Women in Soviet Central Asia

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Introduction

The situation of women was of key importance for the solidification of the Soviet regime in the 1920s and 1930s in Central Asia. Colonial powers, in general, aim at winning the “hearts and minds” of traditional societies, or, if it is not possible, they aim at the deconstruction of the traditional ties of these societies, in order to make place for their own new structures. Women, as the transmitter of traditions and the maintainers of family honour, can act as powerful allies in both cases – or, if they resist the influence of the conquering power, can be major and inescapable enemies as well.

In Central Asia, the rule of the Soviet Union seemingly brought empowerment to women by its “civilizational mission”. As an exchange, these women were expected to support Soviet aims. At the same time, the empowerment of women also contributed to the elimination of traditional ties within the society. As a consequence, the importance of the traditional female
model was enhanced and politicised as a way of resistance against Soviet power. In this violent political (and several times physical) struggle between the Soviet and the traditional value systems, women ended up as liminal beings stuck between the two models, obliged to follow the Soviet stereotypes in public, and the traditional ones in private. In this way, instead of real empowerment, they had to carry a very specific double burden in an environment based on double consciousness.

The aim of my research is to analyse the struggle between the Soviet and the traditional forces in Central Asia, focusing on the liminal position of women, who were used as political objects during this struggle, being (often forcefully) inscribed with the colliding values of the two antagonistic forces at the same time.

**The Soviet Union as the ‘feminist colonialist’ of Central Asia**

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the so-called women question became a significant matter of concern in many parts of Europe and Asia, and especially in the Muslim East. The discourse about the emancipation and empowerment of women typically got intertwined with the process of modernization, and it went hand in hand with an attack on traditional, often religious ways of life.¹

The women question was an important issue for the Soviet regime as well, both in the frames of its ‘civilisational mission’ aimed at a rapid modernisation and its Marxist ideological base aimed at setting women free from their burdens stemming from capitalist patriarchal

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approaches. Soviet attempts to foster the empowerment of women led to the most visible outcomes in the former southern territories of Tsarist Russia.\(^2\) However, in spite of these outcomes of the Soviet endeavour, the empowerment of Central Asian women could only reach its declared objectives on the surface. The process, at the end of the day, left these women in a liminal space between modernisation and tradition, and turned the Soviet Central Asian society into two-faced and controversial in terms of gender equality.

When we consider the course of history, we can see that colonial endeavours and ambitions were often accompanied by the intention of changing traditional societies and cultures through the influence of a colonial power to its own image.\(^3\) Such acts of modernisation attempted to alter the very core of subordinated traditional societies. Therefore, besides the thoroughly emphasized aim of civilisation and empowerment, they also served as tools for the settlement of the external influence of colonial powers. The role of women in the given traditional societies frequently played a very significant part in these processes. They usually acted as the main preservers of traditional identities, therefore, winning their hearts and minds was a key component to success.\(^4\)

In the Soviet case, the motivation of the mission empowering women was much more complex than in the case of classical colonial powers or in well-known examples of modernising projects. The Communist Manifesto already indicated the strong commitment of the Communist movement to set women free from their patriarchal chains, stemming from the capitalist mode of production. The Manifesto argues that the “bourgeois sees his wife a mere


instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women.”

Engels’s book *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, published in 1884, further elaborates on the allegedly problematic issue of the traditional family and the traditional roles of women within. The Bolsheviks considered these ideas vital for the development of the new Soviet society and tried to implement these principles into practice. The most significant manifestation of this approach is the 1918 family code, introduced by Aleksandra Kollontai, that time Commissar for Social Welfare. Even if the 1930s saw the end of the most progressive approaches on women and the attack on the traditional family, the Soviet restructuration of the Central Asian societies began in the era which demanded female empowerment.

However, in the meantime, the Soviet Union was undeniably a colonial-style power in Central Asia. When the Bolshevik revolution ousted the Tsarist regime, one of the main concerns of the new rule was the question of Muslim Central Asia. On the basis of the Marxist-Leninist ideology, the Soviet leaders felt the urge to very clearly refuse and condemn the former colonial-imperial Tsarist rule over this area, while in practice they sorely needed the natural resources of the region for the consolidation of the new regime. In this situation, they tried to implement a theoretical programme of modernising Central Asian societies. In this way, the new regime could ensure its influence over the region, while the proposed empowerment of ‘backward’ societies met the requirements of the Marxist-Leninist ideology. The subsequent attack on traditional relations had a special focus on Central Asian women. The ‘civilisational

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5 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party (February 1848), 25.
mission’ of the Soviet regime was assumed to bring equality to its Central Asian republics in gender relations as well. It was not exceptional in that period of time, among others, Turkey, Afghanistan and Iran\(^9\) also took significant steps for the emancipation of women in the name of modernisation.

Parallely, though, the Soviet Union followed the footsteps of colonial powers, and had to face the very strong traditional core of Central Asian societies which refused to abandon its own value system and had not let itself formed to the image of the colonial powers under Tsarist Russia either. The Soviet Union, though, was not a forgiving colonial power as its predecessor – it aimed to exert its influence to all areas of life, regardless of being public or private.

In this way, Central Asian women became the targets of Soviet policies for two main reasons. First, they were considered as the natural supporters of Soviet empowerment and natural allies in the fight for a new Soviet lifestyle, including the abandonment of the traditional family as a concept. Second, as women in traditional societies in general, they held the key to the core values of the society, contributing very significantly for the preservation of the traditional bonds and networks which strengthened the cohesion and perseverance of Central Asian societies. Thus, with the empowerment of women, both of the two mentioned colonial aims were supposed to be fulfilled: first, to win the “hearts and minds” of traditional societies; second, to deconstruct the traditional ties and networks within these societies, in order to make place for the new Soviet structures.

As the main Soviet feminist and colonial motivations became intertwined in the 1920s and 1930s, a very unique situation developed in Central Asia, where the very progressive new

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feminist ideas and the traditional colonial aims were intended to be reached by mostly the same policies. This “feminist colonialist” approach, using the empowerment of women to destroy the traditional values and identities of the Central Asian societies led to several controversial outcomes in the region, leaving its marks on it even in nowadays.

**Competing narratives of female values**

Although the Communist Manifesto promised to “transform the relations between the sexes into a purely private matter which concerns only the persons involved”, the Soviet authorities decided to intervene deeply into the relationships between men and women in Central Asia in order to be able to fulfil their aims and transform the societies. They intended to deconstruct and revise traditional hegemonic femininities, especially their “hierarchical and complementary relationship to hegemonic masculinity”, which had guaranteed the subordination of women.

The traditional Central Asian women, similarly to the widespread classical stereotypical image of womanhood, had its domain in the private sphere, at home, and only in exceptional cases in the public sphere. Their everyday activities gathered around the traditional female roles of being a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother. They acted as the main transmitters of traditions within the family and the closer community, and they were the protectors of family honour with their conservative, secluded way of life and modest, obedient behaviour. As an exchange, males provided them with the necessary goods, and carried the


economic burdens for the maintenance of the family.\textsuperscript{12} This narrative constructed the hegemonic femininity in the Central Asian approach for hundreds of years.

The newly established Soviet female ideal type, in the meantime, bore the features of a woman who is equal with men in both the public and private spheres, takes part in political activities, is economically self-sufficient, has equal access to the benefits of the labour market, and is empowered by the state services of education and healthcare.\textsuperscript{13} This ideal type was certainly the transmitter of emancipation and empowerment, but it is also important to highlight the fact that it also transmitted Soviet cultural patterns, becoming inseparable from external influence on traditional Central Asian societies. The Soviet female ideal type was presented as a new kind of hegemonic femininity – initiated by the colonial power and implemented rather violently. In this way, it was related to the traditional femininity as its superior, and the intended empowerment was intertwined with certain oppressive tendencies, especially as the two sets of female values were so radically different.

**A clash of two value systems**

There was an antagonistic conflict between the new and the traditional models of female values, which became quickly visible in the 1920s, when the Soviet regime began to enact several laws and other regulations in order to spread the Soviet model of female behaviour.\textsuperscript{14} These laws and regulations aimed to eliminate traditional practices, which, in the eyes of the


Communist power, were obvious signs of female subordination and oppression, contributing to the seclusion of women. Among these practices, many customs were considered essential for preserving a family's honour and/or for complying the expectations of traditional authorities and communities, such as veiling, polygyny, child marriage, bride-price, forced and arranged marriage, bride eloping and arbitrary divorce.

The traditional societies of Soviet Central Asia insisted on their own norms and values, and tried to preserve them with every possible means, from small legal shortcuts to brutal violence. For the former, the practice of committing polygyny or paying the bride-price were common examples. In the first instance, husbands often exploited the double standards of Soviet and Islamic law, marrying their first wife according to state conventions, and taking the second or third on the basis of Islamic traditional customs. In the second instance, the bride-price was simply paid secretly, or under other labels. As for brutal violence, it was not uncommon to mutilate, rape or even kill unveiled women, especially in the rural areas of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan during the 1920s and the 1930s. These women were many times considered to bring shame to the names and namus of their families. According to the study of Marianne Kamp, only between 1927 and 1929, around 2 000 women were killed in Uzbekistan as a response to the hujum, the most intense unveiling campaign carried out by

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18 Northrop, Veiled Empire, 95-96.
Soviet authorities.\(^{19}\) Violence against women who transgressed traditional gender norms was also present in those places where the veil was not common, like Turkmenistan.\(^{20}\)

Misunderstandings and even the complete lack of understanding from the side of the Soviet regime could frequently lead to the opposite effect of what the governing authorities meant to reach. A vivid example for this is again the question of the bride-price, which was eliminated in order to erase the perceived objectification and unequal status of women. The implementation of the law just further decreased the status of daughters within the family, and further contributed to the economic dependence of women.\(^{21}\) Furthermore, the insistence of the Soviet regime on changing traditional values led to the fact that following these values became a political statement, a political tool, as the expression of hostility and resistance against the Soviet influence.\(^{22}\)

**Acculturation to double consciousness**

Hence, the fate of Central Asian women became a theoretical terrain for the clash of local traditional and Soviet modernisational forces. It became unambiguous after the first decade of Soviet rule that neither of the two forces could fully overcome or eliminate its alternative. The ideological choice between the two complex ways of life gradually gave its place to an acculturational process, to a process of mutual adaptation, which was built on a sequence of compromises. During the 1920s and 1930s, the interaction between the several Soviet

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\(^{20}\) Cf. Edgar, “Emancipation of the Unveiled.”

\(^{21}\) Edgar, “Emancipation of the Unveiled,” 140-141.

\(^{22}\) Northrop, Veiled Empire, 108.
campaigns aiming to liberate and empower the Central Asian population and the local answers of refusal and condemnation led to many changes in the initial expectations at both sides. In this way, the originally alternative ways of life gradually became complementary in many senses. Through this acculturational process, however, women became liminal beings at the crossroads of bipolar expectations and values belonging to the very different female ideal types of traditional and Soviet frameworks. For example, veiled women of rural Uzbekistan in the 1920s and 1930s were subjects of agitation against the veil from the side of the state, while unveiled women often suffered from constant mockery from the side of the family and the closer community.

The parallel presence of the two systems of values not only led to a significant change in the roles of women. It also contributed to the restructuration of the whole area of Central Asian social life in general, and to the development of a special double consciousness among all layers of the societies. The Soviet power managed to solidify its influence in the public sphere and turned it into its own domain, which was dominated by modern values. In the meantime, the private sphere remained the exclusionary domain of families and local communities, embodying the world of traditional values.

At the end of this restructuration, the developing and forming liminal position of women gradually became a norm in Central Asia. The ideal types of the modern Soviet and the traditional Central Asian woman realized themselves through the acculturational process in

23 Northrop, Veiled Empire, 344-347.
25 Poliakov, Everyday Islam, 143.
many different forms, the features of which were determined by several different factors, such as nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, being rural or urban, or the expectations of the family and the neighbourhood. Women who belonged to different social layers, represented significantly different interests.\textsuperscript{26} In spite of the individual differences, they were similar in a remarkable aspect: they lived in an in-between position between the traditional and the modern systems of values. The modern public and the traditional private spheres worked on the basis of a silent compromise, showing mutual respect for each other's domains, in order to be able to maintain theirs. In the meantime, women were burdened by contradictory expectations from both sides.

The case of the paranja and the chachvon

The issue of the paranja, thoroughly examined by Douglas Northrop in his work Veiled Empire offers an illustrative case study about the compromise concerning the situation of women. The issue of the legal ban on wearing the paranja, a heavy cotton robe that covered the entire body of women, and its chachvon, a kind of veil made of horsehair, covering the face and the neck, which was characteristics in Uzbekistan, was raised several times before the second World War in Soviet Central Asia. However, Soviet authorities kept refraining from the codification of such a law, even against the visible support from many different layers of the society. On the one hand, the authorities were worried about their credibility. It was perfectly clear for them that considering the attitude of the society towards the earlier attempts to eliminate these pieces of attire, the practical implementation of an official ban on the paranja and the chachvon could not have been successful at all. A mistake like this would have casted a sense of failure to the so far widely praised emancipation process. On the other

\textsuperscript{26} Northrop, Veiled Empire, 87-88.
hand, in the light of the already mentioned violence against unveiled women and propaganda workers, and after some cases of sporadic local unrest, the authorities could not ignore the possibility of erupting social tensions as a response either. Meanwhile, the Uzbek society attempted to demonstrate its unconditional commitment and insistence to the traditional values in this question with every possible tools. Nothing shows their commitment better than the fact that the number of women donning in paranja and chachvon increased under the most fierce attack against them.27

Conclusion

As this issue also indicates, although the outcomes of the Soviet-led modernisation and empowerment process in Central Asia may seem convincing for the first time, a closer examination of them shows that the process, similarly to other comparable attempts like Turkey or Afghanistan or Iran in this era, was highly controversial. Under the empowered public surface, traditional gender roles and patriarchal male-female relations were maintained at the private level of the family and the community. The subsequent liminal place of women between the two levels, therefore, signifies the partiality of modernisation and empowerment, and the persisting influence of patriarchal traditional values. Under the given circumstances, all these elements can be considered as a part of the price, which the Soviet regime paid for its self-contradicting ‘feminist colonialist’ approach in Central Asia.

27 Northrop, Veiled Empire, 284-313.
Bibliography


