

# **Support, a Chat, and a Cup of Tea: Soviet Modernization and Strategies for Women’s Emancipation in Central Asia, 1924–1935**

*Eva Rogaar*

## **Introduction**

Bibi Pal’vanova was an exemplary case of a formerly “backward” and “oppressed” Central Asian woman who had been “liberated” and “emancipated” by Bolshevik and Soviet power in Central Asia after the October Revolution of 1917. Born as the daughter of a poor peasant in imperial Turkestan, she received education in the Soviet system, and eventually became a Professor of History and a correspondent member of the Academy of Sciences in Central Asia. In several memoirs, she shared her experiences and memories of the Soviet campaign for women’s liberation in early Soviet Central Asia. According to one of her editors, she reflected “with documentary precision, how her Eastern sisters, with the help of their older sisters –

female Russian Bolsheviks – and under the guidance of the Communist Party, obtained equality, and lived freely and happily in the Soviet Union.”<sup>1</sup> One of the central aspects in her memoir *Emansipatsiia musul'manki* (“Muslim women’s emancipation”) was a discussion of the strategies of the Communist Party’s Women’s Division, the *zhenotdel*, to gain access to Muslim women in order to engage them in the Soviet project in the 1920s. The following telling passage captures the essence of her story well:

In areas with strong traditions of reclusion and with few female workers [which was the case in the Soviet East, especially in Uzbekistan], *zhenotdels* stood for the task to find a way of meeting with local women that would give them the opportunity to gather women together in groups, talk with them, and educate them. Such an opportunity was found in the form of the women’s club. It was a clever vehicle for work among Muslim women, and it was informed by life itself. (...) Since the women’s clubs met in closed spaces that only women could enter, even men who still held backward views on women did not object to their wives visiting the clubs. For the secluded Muslim woman, however, a visit to the club had great significance: it provided her an insight into the new world of the collective, under cover of the *zhenotdel*.<sup>2</sup>

Pal’vanova’s story was not an isolated case. Her account reflected the widespread view in Soviet propaganda that Central Asian, and in particular Uzbek, women were uneducated and in need of “enlightenment,” yet incapable of making the decision to pursue it themselves, because their husbands or other family members would make such decisions for them. Aware of the persistence of traditional gender and family relations, and of seclusion and women’s veiling, activists understood that they had to approach women and their relatives in a manner that was not hostile, and would show their good intentions. The fact that women were invited to an environment where they would be surrounded exclusively by other women would take away possible suspicion on the side of the family, and the friendly, welcoming attitude of activists would make women feel at home. Only after they had gained the trust of these Uzbek women and their relatives, they would come inside, and in that closed, warm, safe environment, activists could slowly start educating them, and familiarizing them with the new Soviet way of life. As the last sentence of the quote highlights, the *zhenotdel* created a Soviet microcosm, in which visiting women would softly but steadily be immersed.

This paper examines Soviet strategies for the “liberation” and “emancipation” of Uzbek women in the 1920s and early 1930s, such as presented in Pal’vanova’s account. My reason for focusing on the Uzbek case is mainly a pragmatic one: most

<sup>1</sup> Pal’vanova, Bibi, *Docheri Sovetskogo Vostoka*, 5, Moscow 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Pal’vanova, Bibi, *Emansipatsiia musul'manki: Opyt raskrepostobcheniia zhenshchiny sovet'skogo Vostoka*, 101–102, Moscow 1982.

scholarship and primary materials on this topic in Central Asia has been centered on (urban) Uzbekistan. This may be related to the fact that Tashkent played an important role in history as the capital of imperial Russian Turkestan, and the capital of Soviet Turkestan until the national delimitation of Central Asia in 1924. Much of the imperial and Soviet administration for the area was thus situated in what then became the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, and this was the region of Central Asia the authorities had the most knowledge of. Existing scholarship on the subject of the Soviet women's liberation campaign in Uzbekistan (or Central Asia more broadly) does not typically focus to this side of *zhenotdel* and other Party organizations' activism in the early and mid-1920s. Some scholars do not take these efforts into account altogether, while others have discussed them mainly as a (largely ineffective) prologue to what was to come with the "Hujum" ("assault") in 1927. The "Hujum" was a campaign that Soviet activists carried out in Uzbekistan between roughly 1927 and 1929, and which was part of an attempt to speed up the struggle for women's emancipation and against the remnants of the old "byt" (way of life). In this scholarship, the Hujum is viewed as a radical breaking point, marking the transition from mild attempts toward women's unveiling, to massive and violent ones. Yet a closer examination of approaches to women's emancipation in Soviet Uzbekistan leads to a more differentiated picture in which non-coercive approaches prevailed. The distinction between violent and non-violent is far from clear-cut, but by non-violent and non-coercive initiatives I mean initiatives that did not involve physical or verbal abuse. Publications by Soviet ideologists and activists themselves show that efforts to take Uzbek women's feelings, needs, and habits into consideration were in fact central to Soviet strategies for Uzbek women's emancipation throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s.

Of course, such an analysis of Soviet discourse and approaches in itself reveals little about the actual effectiveness of such non-coercive empowerment strategies in practice. What it does provide, however, are new insights into contemporary Soviet views of Uzbek women, into ideologists' and activists' arguments for the best strategies to engage these women in the Soviet project, and into the specific society they envisioned for the region and the meaning of the "new Soviet woman" in this particular context. In this paper, I seek to develop three major arguments. First of all, I argue that non-coercive types of activism, such as women's clubs, were central to the Soviet women's liberation campaign in Uzbekistan from its initiation in the 1920s on. Sources strongly suggest that like in the Russian part of the Soviet Union, the Party and its women's section sought to go beyond the mere elimination of outward manifestations of religion and the old "byt." They were also deeply invested in a genuine and comprehensive transformation of these women's public and private lives and worldviews, as part of the entirely new order the Bolsheviks sought to build from the moment they came to power. As William G. Rosenberg

maintains, they pursued a full-fledged “cultural revolution,” a profound transformation of society with “new social values, as well as revolutionary social relations, and the stimulus for radically new proletarian cultural forms.”<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, I contend that while the Hujum of 1927 indeed signified a turning point in the scale and rigor of the liberation campaign, there was also significant continuity between the types of activism before and after 1927. A personal, non-coercive, and comprehensive approach to Uzbek women’s emancipation remained a major aspect of Soviet activism well into the 1930s. The *zhenotdel*’s shutdown in 1929 did not lead to radical change in that regard; its activities were taken over and continued by a range of Soviet institutions and organizations, such as unions, factories, farms, and the Komsomol. The third major argument is that although the campaigns for women’s emancipation in the center and in Soviet Uzbekistan were part of the same project to transform women into developed and engaged members of Soviet society, the ways in which the new “*byt*” and the “new Soviet woman” were defined in their specific contexts were quite different. Whereas in the Russian part of the Soviet Union the state and activists propagated complete gender equality, full social and economic independence of women, and the “withering away” of the family, the “new Uzbek woman” in Soviet propaganda also became more independent in thought and action, but continued to operate within the framework of family relations.

In addition to these arguments, I also treat a number of subthemes that uncover other aspects of Soviet views and approaches regarding Uzbek women’s liberation and emancipation. I discuss the understandings of morality, order, and health that were closely linked to ideas of emancipation, and part of a broader agenda for pursuit of Soviet modernity. This latter project, I argue, served as an important justification for increased state control and intervention in citizens’ lives, down to the most intimate levels of social relations. Moreover, I look into the importance of space and aesthetics in Soviet strategies for reaching out to women and bringing them into contact with this new Soviet modernity that the leadership and activists envisioned. Lastly, religion is an important theme; it figured prominently in Soviet propaganda, where it was depicted as one of the major symptoms, agents and causes of the old “bourgeois” order.

The primary source base for this paper consists mainly of articles and books by Soviet ideologists, and mostly female Soviet activists in Uzbekistan (both Russian and Central Asian women). Among the writings by the latter are both contemporary publications and memoirs published in later decades. Some of the sources I have used have not been consulted by the secondary academic works that I am familiar with. Other materials have been used by other scholars in the past, though primarily

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<sup>3</sup> Rosenberg, William G., Introduction, in: William G. Rosenberg ed., *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia. Part 1: The Culture of a New Society: Ethics, Gender, the Family, Law, and Problems of Tradition*, Ann Arbor 1990, 5.

for their sections about unveiling, force, and violence. These aspects, however, constitute only one part of what these sources can tell us about the Soviet campaign for women's emancipation in Uzbekistan. While acknowledging the important insights of existing scholarship, I have therefore attempted to investigate the sources from a different angle, and examine what they reveal about the Soviet attempts to bring about profound social change, through a careful, and thoughtful approach.

## Making the “New Soviet Woman”: State Intervention in the Domestic Sphere and “Byt”

Pal'vanova and her colleague-activists in Turkestan, and later Soviet Uzbekistan, were part of a much larger campaign for women's liberation and emancipation that the Bolsheviks started in all the areas under their rule after the 1917 Revolution. They stressed that in order to make the modernization of the country possible, it was necessary to eliminate all the elements of the old “byt” (way of life), which had made women the most backward of all groups in society. This was, so they claimed, the result of pre-revolutionary capitalist and bourgeois traditions that had left women with a double burden of work and household tasks, which prevented them from participating in public life, culture, and politics in the way men did.<sup>4</sup> As a result, the typical backward woman, or “baba” was illiterate, deeply religious, and highly superstitious.<sup>5</sup>

The term “byt” in this discourse deserves some explanation, as it is an elusive term. It is often translated into English as “way of life” or “daily life”, but the concept is more complicated than this. What it represented could vary for different contexts, periods, even individuals. Broadly speaking, however, it encompassed not merely acts of everyday life, but also thoughts, beliefs, and worldviews and the systems and material conditions that informed these. The Bolsheviks understood the backward “old byt” in the 1920s to be all day-to-day manifestations of capitalist or bourgeois systems or mentality, and religion was an inextricable part of this. It seems that “byt” was a malleable concept that could include a wide range of actions and ideas that could potentially undermine, or frustrate the extension of, Soviet authority and control.

The need to overcome backwardness and move toward modernization had to do in part with older historical Russian anxieties about civilization, Russian identity, and the country's perceived backwardness in relation to the West; and in part with the wish of the Bolsheviks to eliminate archaic patriarchal social relations and mobilize the population for the socialist project.<sup>6</sup> The question of mobilization became

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<sup>4</sup> Goldman, Wendy Z., *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936*, Cambridge 1993, 1–3.

<sup>5</sup> Wood, Elizabeth A., *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, Bloomington 1997, 216.

<sup>6</sup> Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 5–6.

particularly urgent after the Revolution and civil war, when the country was weakened, impoverished, and divided. Women allegedly were the most backward element of society, yet at the same time they were the ones who were seen as the “mothers of the nation,” responsible for giving birth to strong children for the future of the country. The claim of women’s backwardness and the state’s self-proclaimed responsibility to eliminate it, provided the leadership the opportunity to intervene in the sphere of social relations and even on the level of “byt”. As historian of gender politics in the Soviet Union Elizabeth Wood puts it, “The perceived backwardness of the female population thus gave the Bolsheviks entrée into the most private relationships, those between husband and wife, parent and child.”<sup>7</sup>

In the sphere of gender and family relations, as Wendy Goldman shows in her work on reforms in the Russian part of the country in the early Soviet period, the Bolsheviks argued that women could only become true members of Soviet society if household labor were taken over by the state. The idea was that in the foreseeable future, paid workers in dining halls, childcare centers, laundries, and the like would take care of all women’s former domestic tasks of cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing. Eventually, so it was claimed, women would work and become fully independent, both socially and economically; as a result, marriage would become superfluous, and the institution of the family would eventually “wither away.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, abortion was legalized in 1920, only to be prohibited again in 1936, in response to negative demographic trends.<sup>9</sup>

The leadership’s urge to modernize and revitalize the country also provided the state an argument for increased intervention in citizens’ lives in the sphere of health and sanitation. The civil war had left many dead, starved, crippled, or chronically ill, and the country had become militarily, economically, and industrially weak. The Soviet state assumed the task of improving people’s living and working conditions, and making the country healthy and strong. In 1918 a special Party organ, the People’s Commissariat of Public Health, “Narkomzdrav,” came into being for the protection of the health and welfare of all citizens.<sup>10</sup> “Hygiene” became an important aspect of the “new Soviet life.” Both ideologists and Narkomzdrav activists supported, as Starks maintains, “habits for body, home, and life centered on order, rationality, and balance.”<sup>11</sup> The agenda for “hygiene” went much beyond health and illness alone: it had an important political side to it, as well. The message thus also had a strong ethical and moral connotation; it was not only about being physically healthy, but also about being mentally “sane,” making morally “right” decisions, and being a good, responsible person and citizen. The campaign propagated a regulated, hygienic lifestyle that was closely associated with mental health and modernity, and with state programs of education and medical inquiry; citizens who lived

<sup>7</sup> Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 2–3.

<sup>8</sup> Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 2–3.

<sup>9</sup> Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 255.

<sup>10</sup> Starks, Tricia, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State*, Madison 2008, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Starks, *The Body Soviet*, 4.

their lives according to order and health, would be enlightened, strong, productive, and happy, which would lead them automatically to choose for the most rational organization of society, socialism. In order to spread this “healthy” lifestyle, a whole range of activities, campaigns, and educational programs was organized that showed Soviet citizens “how to eat, bathe, and decorate the house,” and which activities were appropriate for them to pursue.<sup>12</sup>

“Motherhood and infancy” were major focal points for the Soviet health campaign, as well. This was closely related to the state’s desire for higher birthrates and lower infant mortality rates. Increasingly, campaigns for natal health and the importance of proper child-rearing were related to the advice of physicians. Motherhood in Soviet propaganda became more and more rationalized, and was presented as a skill that any woman could learn with the right instruction and monitoring. Under the guidance of the state, Soviet women were expected to give birth to, and raise, strong, healthy children for the future of their country. Here, too, there thus was a strong moral component to the state’s rhetoric and policies. More profoundly than in other states, according to Tricia Starks in her book on campaigns for health and sanitation in the Soviet Union, issues related to home, body, life, and leisure were deemed by the Soviet state as public concerns that directly affected the Soviet project, and therefore required strong state control.<sup>13</sup>

In order to bring the message of the “new Soviet byt” to women, and to educate them in this new lifestyle, the Party did not only advertise its new policies. As was the case in other states, the Soviet leadership understood that abstract theories would not suffice for a true social transformation: such a thing would only be possible through radical change in people’s thinking and behavior.<sup>14</sup> With regard to gender politics, it the Soviet state therefore also actively pursued outreach work among women through a special women’s section of the Party, the *zhenotdel*, which was founded in 1919. Much of the *zhenotdel*’s activities were directed at non-Party women, meant to show ordinary women the benefits of the Communist Party’s ideas, and make them understand what was “best” for them and for society. As Wood shows, however, although the focus on women as the most backward part of society provided the Party the opportunity to extend its influence to the most intimate aspects of social and family life, the creation of such a separate women’s section did not take place without its dilemmas. While the revolution required the solution of the “woman question,” it was at the same time at odds with the Party’s class politics to take special efforts for women’s emancipation. To resolve this friction, it was stressed that women’s emancipation was desirable, yet explicitly not in

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<sup>12</sup> Starks, *The Body Soviet*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Starks, *The Body Soviet*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Hoffmann, David L., *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941*, Ithaca and London 2003, 8.

the (Western, capitalist) feminist way, for the latter was considered to be a bourgeois ideology. Moreover, there was the dilemma that if trade unions and the Party did not apply affirmative action regarding women, men would dominate decisions and positions of importance, yet special efforts on behalf of women carried the risk of intensifying old inequalities and social relations.<sup>15</sup>

Once the zhenotdel was created, it began to act increasingly independently, advocate for women's wishes, and criticize unsuccessful policies of the Soviet leadership. Party officials did not appreciate these developments, and took measures to restrain the zhenotdel's autonomy. By accusing the organization of "feminist deviations," and installing other restricting measures, in 1923 the zhenotdel was forced to become an obedient advocate of the revolution along Party lines. The uneasy balance between the opportunities and risks – of "feminism," or the chance that women would make demands that opposed Party ideology – that separate activism among women (by women) posed to the state, however, remained present throughout the 1920s. And despite the identity crises that the zhenotdel experienced in the first few years of its existence, Wood argues that gradually, it "began to find ways to talk to women workers and peasants."<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, according to Wood, it was the image of the backward woman that served several important symbolic functions within Party propaganda: the supposed backwardness of the "baba" made the contrast with the strength and "culturedness" of the Soviet comrade seem all the more profound; women's supposed weakness and insecurity were used by the Party as arguments for more interference of the state and zhenotdel in women's lives; "backward" women's resistance (like that of the peasant, priest, or NEPman) could easily be explained as being informed by old, bourgeois traditions, and their "religiosity" could conveniently serve as an argument to attack the Orthodox Church.<sup>17</sup>

The Church and religion indeed figured as a prominent symbol in the Soviet campaign to make the contrast between the old, "backward," "bourgeois" way of life, and the new, "modern," and "cultured" Soviet "byt" seem as profound as possible. The Party portrayed religion as a particularly harmful element of the old order, which had prevented Soviet citizens from emancipation and full participation in the Soviet project of building socialism. Since Soviet propaganda presented women as the most religious and superstitious group in society, it argued that the harmful influence of the Church had hit women particularly hard, and had held back their development more than of any other group. It attacked both religious convictions that informed people's thoughts and actions, and the clergy as representatives and propagators of these convictions. In its attempt to eradicate religion, the leadership started a staunch antireligious campaign, which it pursued most vigorously in the

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<sup>15</sup> Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 8.



1920s and 1930s.<sup>18</sup> In addition to church closings and prosecution of religious figures, 1925, the Party created the League of the Militant Godless (Soiuz Voinstvuiushchikh Bezbozhnikov), a Party organ with the specific task of promoting “atheism” throughout the Soviet Union. It spread the view that religion, like all other remnants of the old order, were incompatible with modern Soviet society. The message was that atheism, in contrast, would liberate women from superstition, dependence, and gender inequality. By means of lectures, films, discussion groups, literature, schools, and other resources, the League sought to teach citizens (both Party members and non-Party members) about the harmful effects of religion, and the benefits of the new, “rational” Soviet worldview.<sup>19</sup>

Soviet ideologists claimed that there was one segment of the women that suffered most profoundly of all women in the Soviet Union from social and economic suppression by the old “byt” (which was to an important degree informed by religion), and that therefore was the most backward and primitive group in the entire country: the “veiled Muslim women of the Soviet East,” i.e., Muslim women in regions like the Caucasus and Tatarstan, but above all in Central Asia.<sup>20</sup> The leadership argued that these Muslim women should be liberated from the customs and social and religious structures that blocked their personal development, and their participation in public life and the workforce.<sup>21</sup> The reason why the Party put particular emphasis on the need to emancipate women in Central Asia, was that this region lacked a substantial working class. In the absence of class struggle, Soviet authorities sought to employ gender relations as a substitute for class. It was therefore in the sphere of gender and family relations and the position of women in the family and society that the struggle had to take place. In this struggle, where women served as a “surrogate proletariat,” they would ultimately acquire the freedom they supposedly needed.<sup>22</sup>

Soviet ideologists considered Islam to be more backward than other religions in the Soviet Union, but it does not seem that they also necessarily believed it was inherently more “dangerous”. This also appears from the fact that the antireligious campaign against Orthodox Christianity in the Russian part of the country was pursued earlier, and was generally speaking harsher, and more massive and comprehensive than the campaign against Islam. Rather, it appears that Soviet propaganda

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<sup>18</sup> Husband, William B., *“Godless Communists”: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia 1917–1932*, DeKalb 2000, XII.

<sup>19</sup> Peris, Daniel, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*, Ithaca 1998, 2; Husband, “Godless Communists”, 62–63.

<sup>20</sup> Northrop, Douglas, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia*, Ithaca 2004, 347.

<sup>21</sup> Keller, Shoshana, *Trapped between the State and Society: Women’s Liberation and Islam in Soviet Uzbekistan, 1926–1941*, in: *Journal of Women’s History* vol. 10, no. 1 (1998), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Massell, Gregory J., *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929*, Princeton 1974; Northrop, *Veiled Empire*, 345–346.

against religion was adjusted to local contexts; in the case of Muslim regions such as Uzbekistan, Islam was “the” religion and therefore specifically targeted. Much like they did in the Russian part of the Soviet Union, leaders and activists went to great lengths to make the difference between the old “byt” – including Islam – on the one hand, and science, “rationality,” and sophistication on the other hand seem as large as they possibly could. An indispensable part of these attempts was the Party’s denial of reforms in the sphere of gender relations that Muslims themselves had already been pursuing in the region. A group of Central Asian Muslims, the *jadids*, had already been arguing for women’s education and emancipation within Islam from the late nineteenth century on, so well before the October Revolution and the arrival of the Bolsheviks in the area.<sup>23</sup>

One of the Central Asian republics where Soviet activists carried out their campaign for women’s liberation and emancipation most vigorously was Soviet Uzbekistan. According to Soviet propaganda, Uzbek women were the most oppressed even among all the women of the Soviet East. The position of Tatar, Bashkir, and even Kirgiz women, and of women in the North Caucasus, in society and the economy was unequal to that of men, and women bore the heaviest burden; in Uzbekistan (as well as in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan), however, women were virtually cut off from society, and their husbands made them work long hours in the domestic, textile, or handicraft industry – industries that ensured their constant proximity to the home – and took the money for their wives’ labor.<sup>24</sup> In this situation, which had supposedly been perpetuated in the colonial period and which had determined the particularities of society and family life in the area, Uzbek women were thus not merely burdened with the role of housekeeper but were also made to work by their husbands and fathers. As a result, according to the Soviet view they were basically slaves, “objects that could be traded, scolded, or even killed.”<sup>25</sup>

How, then, did the Party seek to put its ideas regarding Uzbek women’s liberation into practice, and how did it seek to create “modern,” “emancipated,” Uzbek Soviet women? Although most academic work on women and gender, the antireligious campaign, and health, focuses on the central, Russian part of the Soviet Union, there are a few scholars who have explored the subject of Uzbek women’s emancipation in the first decades of the twentieth century. In the early 2000s, Douglas Northrop and Shoshana Keller published their works, where they focused particularly on the *Hujum* (roughly 1927–1929), and the aspects of it that pursued mass

<sup>23</sup> Khalid, Adeeb, *Making Uzbekistan: Nation, Empire, and Revolution in the Early USSR*, Ithaca and London 2015; Kamp, Marianne, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism*, Seattle 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Liubimova, Serafima, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, Moscow 1928, 5–6.

<sup>25</sup> Bekmukhamedova, M. M., Rost uchastiia Uzbekskikh zhenshchin v obshchestvenno-proizvoditel’nom trude. Trudy Tashkentskogo Gosudarstvennogo Universiteta imeni V. I. Lenina, in: *Voprosy ekonomiki i sotsializma* no. 274 (1966), 80–81.

unveilings. Northrop has focused primarily on the coercive side of the Soviet women's liberation campaign. He presented the campaign and unveiling as something that was violently forced upon women. According to Northrop, the Soviet campaign was altogether rejected by the Uzbeks, and he interprets their reaction as anticolonial resistance.<sup>26</sup> Keller also emphasized the coercive aspects of Soviet project for women's emancipation and unveiling, and has highlighted women's suffering, both from the actions of the Soviet state and by the wave of violence unveiled women experienced from the side of the Uzbeks.<sup>27</sup> Marianne Kamp, in response, has argued that the campaign for unveiling and women's emancipation was not merely a clash between ideas of Soviets and Uzbeks. She still focused on the Hujum and unveiling, but maintained that prerevolutionary jadid reformist ideas coincided and merged with the Soviet campaign in many ways. Kamp therefore considered the violent backlash of the Soviet campaign as a struggle between Uzbeks themselves. For this reason, she primarily examined Uzbek women's sources, and the way their views were shaped by Uzbek reformist ideas. This ultimately led her to argue that the Hujum took place in part upon Uzbek women's demands.<sup>28</sup>

Although this literature has provided valuable insights into the ideas of the Soviet leadership regarding Central Asian and Uzbek women; the coercive aspects of the liberation campaign; and its violent backlash, it also leaves important questions unanswered, and significant aspects of the campaign unaddressed. By focusing on the violent side of the project, much of this scholarship obscures the wide range of non-violent initiatives that Soviet institutions carried out among Uzbek women, in order to pull them away from religion and persuade them to adopt a Soviet worldview and "byt." Sources by Soviet ideologists and activists show that, similar to the cases in the Soviet center as shown by Wood, Goldman, Starks, and others, there were several Soviet organizations that organized a wide variety of activities for acquiring the support of Uzbek women for the Soviet project, and for recruitment of potential future local cadres. As it was in the Russian part of the country, the most prominent and active among these organizations in Soviet Uzbekistan of the 1920s was the zhenotdel, which opened its doors in Central Asia as early as 1919.

## The Zhenotdel and Women's Emancipation in Early Soviet Uzbekistan

Already during the first years after the October Revolution, the first efforts toward the emancipation of the "women of the East" were made in the cities of what was then Turkestan. Female Russian communists, primarily workers and wives of workers and soldiers, took the initiative for the creation of the first independent women's

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<sup>26</sup> Bekmukhamedova, M. M., *Rost ubastiia Uzbeksksikh zhenshchin*, 11–12, 26–27.

<sup>27</sup> Keller, *Trapped between the State and Society*, 24–25.

<sup>28</sup> Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan*, 4–6.

organizations in the region, so-called “women’s unions.” The foundation of such separate women’s organizations initially met with skepticism on the part of Bolshevik ideologists in Russia. The first All-Russian Congress of Workers (Moscow, 1918), for example, emphasized the “dangers” of independent women’s organizations, stressing that female workers did not have interests other than those of the working class as a whole. The reason that such organizations were nevertheless allowed, was the idea that more agitation and propaganda among women was needed because their class consciousness was less developed than that of men. From that moment on, committees for agitation and propaganda among women were founded throughout the country, and in 1919 the Central Committee reorganized these into the department of Women’s Workers and Peasants, also known as the Central zhenotdel. The main “peripheral” sub-department of the zhenotdel in Turkestan was established in 1919, and in the course of 1919–1924 multiple smaller branches appeared throughout Central Asia.<sup>29</sup>

Many Party officials in Central Asia, however, did not take the zhenotdel very seriously during the first years of its existence. In her memoir *Dnevnik zhenotdelki*, zhenotdel activist Serafima Liubimova mentioned her frustration with the initial cynicism of male Party members in the region, and her continuous efforts to counter their pessimism about the zhenotdel’s potential to carry out serious Party work.<sup>30</sup> The zhenotdels in Turkestan argued that only female activists, and not even all of them, had the chance of access to Muslim women; it was necessary to be familiar with their native language, way of life (“byt”), and mindset (“psikhika”), and to earn their trust and respect.<sup>31</sup>

Despite initial doubts about the zhenotdel’s capabilities, however, the Party defined women’s empowerment as an important step in the revolutionary project, and the central authorities eventually affirmed the zhenotdel’s work among Central Asian women. It was argued that under the “old way of life” (“staryi byt”), women in Central Asia had been prevented from participation in public life, and had been deprived of the legal rights that men possessed. This situation did not only profoundly disadvantage women’s development, but it also held back the development of the region itself. Women’s empowerment in Central Asia was therefore not only an act of justice for women, but also of major importance for the development of society as a whole.<sup>32</sup> The 12<sup>th</sup> (1918) and 13<sup>th</sup> (1919) Party Congresses stressed the importance of Party work on the empowerment of women in the East. The Central Committee of the Communist Party and the department concerned with women’s

<sup>29</sup> Pal’vanova, *Docheri sovetskogo Vostoka*, 42–43.

<sup>30</sup> Liubimova Serafima Timofeevna, *Dnevnik zhenotdelki*, Tashkent 1926, 8–10.

<sup>31</sup> Pal’vanova, *Docheri sovetskogo Vostoka*, 49.

<sup>32</sup> Bekmukhamedova, *Rost uchastiia Uzbekskikh zhenshchin*, 81–82.

liberation work in the “East” were especially active in defining the forms and methods for this activism, and issued several major decrees in the early 1920s.<sup>33</sup> Upon the creation of Soviet Turkestan in 1922, the zhenotdel insisted the Central Committee of the Turkestan Communist Party expanded women’s legal rights. Soviet law raised the minimum marriage age for women to 16 and for men to 18; illegalized polygyny, forced marriage, and the payment of bride-price; and granted all women in Turkestan, like in the rest of the Soviet Union, legal equality to men in all spheres of life.<sup>34</sup>

Yet women’s legal equality did not necessarily lead to equality in practice, since, so it was argued, the women of the East were still under pressure of “archaic” customs. Legal rights alone were not sufficient; as Pal’vanova wrote in her memoirs, it was necessary to “awaken the consciousness of the illiterate, passive Eastern woman, and encourage her to participate actively in public life. This required patient and skilled work among the female masses.”<sup>35</sup> After the national delimitation of Central Asia in 1924, and the subsequent creation of the Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics, the work in the sphere of women’s liberation intensified. At its first congress, the Communist Party of the Uzbek SSR adopted a resolution “On work among women,” which stressed that the task of women’s empowerment was profoundly important, for it was not only beneficial for women themselves, but also closely related to the republic’s economic and cultural construction.<sup>36</sup>

The dominant image of Uzbek women in Soviet writings and propaganda appears to have been quite consistent. Interestingly enough, the way Uzbek women were portrayed in women’s activists’ memoirs was not very different from that in publications produced by male Soviet ideologists (many of whom resided in other parts of the country); all presented Uzbek women in an impersonal manner, as being covered in darkness, and lacking personality and any form of agency. Pal’vanova remarked that whereas Kazakh women came to zhenotdel activities by themselves, Uzbek women would always be accompanied by their husbands, who then waited for them outside until the meeting would end, and women would wear their *parandzha* (traditional Uzbek body veil) until the moment they had entered the club; they would follow the orders of total seclusion and separation of the sexes that the Uzbek old “*byt*” demanded from them.<sup>37</sup> This picture of the “helpless” Uzbek woman was reinforced by stories of unveiled local women that were used in Soviet propaganda to demonstrate the great achievements of the campaign women’s emancipation in the region. One Kurbangozel’ Alieva, who had been born in imperial Turkestan and had experienced Soviet “liberation” first-hand, for instance, recalled:

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<sup>33</sup> Liubimova, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, 7–8, 11–12.

<sup>34</sup> Bekmukhamedova, *Rost uchastiia Uzbekskskikh zhenshebin*, 83.

<sup>35</sup> Pal’vanova, *Docheri sovetskogo Vostoka*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Akopian, N.A., *Pervyi s’ezd zhenskoi trudiashcheisia molodezhi Uzbekistana* (oktiabr’ 1935 g.), in *Nauchnye Trudy* no. 212 (1962), 107.

<sup>37</sup> Pal’vanova, *Emansipatsiia musul’manki*, 114.

My husband took me to the zhenotdel (he in front, me behind him), and said: here is my wife, educate her. This was in 1926. I was a veiled, completely dark [“temnaia”] woman, afraid of everything. I thought – what will happen to me? At the women’s club they were very welcoming, like friends, they brought me to the dom dekhkanki [“house for the peasant woman”], introduced me to other women. My husband then took me there every day, as a child to kindergarten. (...) After spending quite some time in the dom dekhkanki, however, I learned how to read and write, became interested in newspapers... From there I started my social work and my new life. (...) I will never forget the dom dekhkanki.<sup>38</sup>

Uzbek women’s exceptional religiosity and pressure from the side of their “conservative” husbands and religious authorities, so it was argued, made the women’s liberation campaign in Uzbekistan particularly challenging. Women’s activists therefore had to do their work carefully, and be thoughtful of the fact that Uzbek women were shy and illiterate, hardly knew anything about the world, and had never learned to think or make decisions for themselves. Activists were instructed to adjust their work to the backwardness of these Eastern women and the particularities of these women’s way of life. Gali Ibragimov,<sup>39</sup> an influential Soviet ideologist in the sphere of emancipatory work among Eastern women, stressed that such work ought to be carried out with great care, “without mockery or harsh insults that [could] offend their religious feelings.”<sup>40</sup> In order to gain access to these women, throughout the 1920s, Soviet activists and ideologists would further develop their strategies for the “liberation” of these supposedly suppressed, backward creatures who so desperately needed Soviet support.

## Major Strategies and Means for Uzbek Women’s Liberation and Empowerment

### Women’s Clubs and “Krasnye Ugolki”

In their endeavor to reach out to Uzbek women, zhenotdels were in need of a strategy that would enable them to create a pleasant and attractive space for women only, where they could gather women, talk with them, and teach them all there was

<sup>38</sup> Pal’vanova, *Docheri sovetskogo Vostoka*, 69–70.

<sup>39</sup> Although Ibragimov specialized in “enlightenment” work among Tatar and Bashkir women, his writings were influential and considered as an important blueprint for work among other Eastern women, as well. See for example Kobetskii, M., *Ocherednye zadachi antireligioznoi propagandy sredi zhenshchin Vostoka*, in *Antireligioznik* no. 2 (1929), 18. Very little information is available about Ibragimov, but it appears that he was a Tatar researcher who worked for the Soviet state as a specialist on Islam and women’s liberation in Muslim regions of the Soviet East. He published books as well as numerous articles in League of the Militant Godless’ journal *Antireligioznik*.

<sup>40</sup> Ibragimov, G., *Kak vesti antireligioznuu propaganda sredi tatarok i bashkirok*, Moscow 1928, 19–20.

to know about life as an independent, active, and knowledgeable Soviet woman. Such a setting was found in the form of women's clubs in urban areas, and their equivalent "krasnye ugolki dekhkanki" ("little red corners for peasant women") for peasant women in rural and urban areas. The first women's club opened its doors in the old city of Tashkent in 1924, and after that the number of clubs in Uzbekistan quickly rose to 34 in 1926, and the number of krasnye ugolki to 30, with around 3000 members in total. Not all members of the club were Party members: as of 1926, of the 30 members of the club in Pskent, for example, only 17 were candidates for Party membership.<sup>41</sup>

Women's clubs offered their female visitors a wide variety of activities and opportunities. First of all, women could take literacy courses, and classes in political organization, but also in more creative fields such as drama, music, and dance, or practical skills such as sewing, cooking, or gardening. There were reading groups and public readings, and many clubs owned reading rooms and extensive libraries. Another central feature on the club's agenda was work "for the protection of mothers and children"; clubs had their own clinics, or organized medical consultations, and women could make use of nurseries and kindergartens free of charge. The clubs also offered classes and discussion groups where women could talk about hygiene, child-rearing, and more generally, on how to live a healthy life and raise strong children.<sup>42</sup> Pal'vanova argued for the importance of work targeting mothers and children by stating that in order to truly help women of national minorities – who under tsardom had had to endure much more severe conditions than other women – to fully develop their capacities and become involved in public life, "it is necessary to start with the thing a woman cares about the most. And what is dearer to a female worker or peasant than her own child?"<sup>43</sup> Thus, besides the state's preoccupation with the political, demographic, and moral aspects of health and cleanliness, the assertion that children were the most important thing for Uzbek women provided the leadership and activists with another argument for intervention in these women's lives.

In addition, women's clubs provided Uzbek women legal advice and support, often through a special inquiry office. This office assisted in the popularization of Soviet laws concerning women's rights, and helped women protect their legal rights. Apart from that, however, on a more general level, it also had to be a place where women could get answers "all the questions that are of interest to a woman." According to Ibragimov, the rationale behind this inquiry bureau, and the provision of care and advice for mothers and children, was to gradually undermine the influence of the Muslim clergy on women's lives. For after all, he argued, if these services did

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<sup>41</sup> Prishchepchik, Z., Opyt raboty klubov v Srednei Azii, *Kommunistka* no. 9 (1926), 76–78.

<sup>42</sup> Prishchepchik, *Opyt raboty klubov v Srednei Azii*, 76–77.

<sup>43</sup> Pal'vanova, *Emansipatsiia musul'manki*, 88.

their work well, women would no longer go to spiritual leaders for advice and support, and they would understand that it was not the Islamic leaders with their sharia who improved the situation of women, but the empowerment and independence that the Soviet state provided them.<sup>44</sup> This line of reasoning shows that Soviet ideologists sought to devise ways to compete with religious leaders in terms of the services they provided, and the spheres in which they operated.

Not all women and their husbands trusted the women's clubs right away. Once they understood that the club was a profoundly useful facility that provided free care, advice, and education, they would quickly become less suspicious.<sup>45</sup> Pal'vanova also remarked that although it would sometimes be difficult to attract women to literacy courses, because they were often already married at an early age (automatically implying that their husbands would make decisions for them), the leaders of the club would negotiate with their husband, parents, and in-laws, "with a cup of tea, at an easy pace, in the Eastern way," after which the woman in question would be more likely to be allowed to visit the club (though not always).<sup>46</sup>

An important feature of women's clubs, as various activists and ideologists maintained, was that it felt to Uzbek women as a safe and home-like space. The factors of aesthetics, affection, and emotion were quite important in this respect. Z. Prishchepchik, for instance, wrote that a successful club is furnished in such a nice way that when an Uzbek woman saw it, she did not want to leave. Clubs offered a space where women could sit down with a cup of tea – a frequently recurring theme in Soviet writings – after their classes, relax, read, and socialize with other women.<sup>47</sup> Pal'vanova wrote about women's clubs as being "informed by life itself," and adjusted to the women's interests and needs in daily life. This warm, innocent appearance seems to have been a significant factor in the clubs' success and its seemingly broad acceptance by Uzbeks. Being a closed space where only women met, both Uzbek women and their husbands were at ease with the women's club, and did not consider it a threat to their values and priorities in life. Once inside the club, and once they had established a relationship of trust, activists would then slowly but surely familiarize their visitors with the life and worldview of the "new Soviet woman."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Ibragimov, Gali, *Antireligioznaia rabota sredi Zhenshchin Vostoka*, in: *Antireligioznik* no. 2 (1930), 45–46.

<sup>45</sup> Pal'vanova, *Docheri sovetskogo Vostoka*, 66–67.

<sup>46</sup> Pal'vanova, *Emansipatsiia musul'manki*, 108.

<sup>47</sup> Prishchepchik, *Opyt Raboty klubov v Srednei Azii*, 78.

<sup>48</sup> Pal'vanova, *Emansipatsiia musul'manki*, 101–102.



## Women's Shops and Cooperatives

Soviet activists maintained that until 1925, grocery shopping in Central Asia was primarily a male business. Since they could encounter male customers in the shop, and the employees were men, women could only go shopping wearing their *parandzhas* and *chachvans* (Uzbek body and face veil), and in practice they often preferred sending their husbands to do it. There was no opportunity for them to take off their veil there, or to “overcome the fear of men that had been embedded in them since childhood,” let alone become active members of consumer’s cooperatives (*potrebkoooperatsii*).<sup>49</sup> In order to alter this situation, the Communist Party in Uzbekistan introduced a new concept: in addition to public shops for a mixed public, shops were opened exclusively for women; they were operated by women only, and the products they offered corresponded to women’s needs. The first women’s shop (*zhenskaia lavka*) of Soviet Uzbekistan was opened in 1925, in the old city of Tashkent, and according to Soviet records, by 1927, there were already 17 shops in the republic, through which 3583 women were employed.<sup>50</sup>

The primary goal of these women’s shops, according to activists and ideologists, was not to provide Uzbek women with groceries; this was rather a means to attract Uzbek women in the first place. It was argued that by attracting women to the stores, employees and female Soviet activists would gain access to their Uzbek customers, which would give them the opportunity to educate them in Soviet values, culture, and politics, and inform them on work in cooperative enterprises. In her article on women’s shops in women’s magazine *Kommunistka*, E. Butuzova argued that the political and cultural work of the stores among its visitors was deemed extremely important, for it was one of the few available means to “introduce the new Soviet life into the Uzbek family.”<sup>51</sup> She discussed how the primary strategy for attracting women to women’s shops and arousing their interest in cooperatives was by selling goods that were scarce on the market, such as the popular green tea “*kok-chai*,” and by giving shareholders particular benefits. Moreover, they offered poor customers the option of payment by instalments.<sup>52</sup>

Thus, apart from their function of selling groceries to women, the women’s stores’ activities and approaches in many ways resembled those of women’s clubs and *krasnye ugolki*. Shops organized public readings of Soviet literature<sup>53</sup> or Uzbek

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<sup>49</sup> Tunik, M., *Rabota sredi zhenshchin v potrebkoooperatsii Uzbekistana*, in: *Kommunistka* no. 5 (1927), 56–57.

<sup>50</sup> Butuzova, E., *Zhenskie lavki v Uzbekistane*, in: *Kommunistka* no. 9 (1927), 63–64.

<sup>51</sup> Butuzova, *Zhenskie lavki v Uzbekistane*, 45.

<sup>52</sup> Butuzova, *Zhenskie lavki v Uzbekistane*, 64–65.

<sup>53</sup> Unfortunately I have not been able to locate sources that provide specific information about the literature the *zhenotdels* used for their activities. Reports from Soviet publishing houses, and archival materials of the Department for Agitation and Propaganda could probably shed more light on this question.

women's magazine *Iangi-Iul*,<sup>54</sup> or turned the stores into tea houses on quiet days. Shop employees, local or "European" women who spoke Uzbek (all candidates for Party membership), would have discussions with customers on a variety of topics that the visitors themselves would initiate, such as family problems or legal issues, or how to become politically involved. More generally, like in the legal inquiry offices, employees were instructed that it was of major importance for them provide women with answers and information they could not get in their own circles. Of particular importance was also the task of women's shops in the sphere of medical and pedagogical advice to mothers. Shops organized so-called "mother and child" gatherings where women received instructions on how to take care of themselves and their children, and where they had access to free medical consults and medication. And finally, women's shops provided an opportunity for introducing Uzbek women to the work of shop managers, board members, and cooperatives more generally.<sup>55</sup> And all this happened in a welcoming, clean, and nicely decorated environment with well-organized and educated employees, where women would be comfortable, and where, again, husbands would feel they could safely let their wives go to.<sup>56</sup> As Pal'vanova commented in her memoirs later, the women's shops were not only successful in economic respect, but they were also profoundly popular among local women. Therefore, as a strategy adjusted to local circumstances, these shops became one of the *zhenotdel's* primary vehicles for Uzbek women's emancipation in those years.<sup>57</sup>

### Antireligious Groups and Other Antireligious Activism

Whereas in the Russian part of the Soviet Union the League of the Godless was a sizable Party institution that operated independently, its subsections in the "East" and especially in Central Asia were profoundly smaller and less influential. Indeed, writings by "bezbozhniki" in Central Asia were relatively sparse, and the League of the Godless was hardly mentioned by activists and ideologists except in the League's own journals *Antireligioznik* and *Bezbozhnik*. This did not mean, however, that the struggle against religion was not on the Soviet agenda for Central Asia; on the contrary, the spread of antireligious or atheist propaganda was a major component of Soviet "enlightenment" work among women in the "East," and so it was in the case

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<sup>54</sup> This was a magazine edited by women from the Uzbek *jadid*/Soviet intelligentsia. Marianne Kamp writes that the editors used this magazine to "translate" the Soviet message about women's emancipation into a form that was acceptable to a broad group of Uzbek women, but it is debatable whether this was the only place where such a translation took place; it seems that Russian Soviet activists in Uzbekistan already adjusted their approaches to local circumstances to an important degree, in the first place.

<sup>55</sup> Tunik, *Rabota sredi zhenshchin v potrebkooperatsii Uzbekistana*, 57–58.

<sup>56</sup> Butuzova, *Zhenskii lavki v Uzbekistane*, 66.

<sup>57</sup> Pal'vanova, *Docheri sovetskogo Vostoka*, 74.

of Uzbekistan. In the absence of independent facilities of the League of the Godless, antireligious gatherings and propaganda were organized primarily under the banner of women's clubs and *krasnye ugolki*. Where possible, the latter were instructed to make use of literature, textbooks, and visual materials for women, produced by the League of the Godless.<sup>58</sup>

In his writings, Ibragimov discussed how antireligious work among women could take various shapes. There were reading groups for antireligious literature, where women could also purchase affordable antireligious literature; small group discussions about antireligious topics; and excursions to museums, factories, farms, hospitals, or power stations. From these excursions, activists were encouraged to draw "antireligious conclusions," emphasizing that these grand Soviet achievements would never have been possible without science, reason, and hard work.<sup>59</sup> Antireligious activities would usually take place in small settings, though there was also antireligious work on a larger scale, in the form of large antireligious concerts, music, or poetry. Female activists were also encouraged to conduct antireligious work in their own home, among family members, or whenever they would visit friends, or go to the theatre.<sup>60</sup>

Ibragimov stressed that it was important for activists not to start out with clearly antireligious conversation topics right away, and to avoid abstract themes. Instead, he instructed activists to start with a cup of tea, and discuss topics that were of immediate interest to Uzbek women themselves, such as child-rearing, or issues that were being discussed in the women's club at that time. From there one could slowly move on to talking about the harmful effects of the old "byt," not only on their position in society, but also on their health and that of their children.<sup>61</sup> It was argued by one L.K. in the journal *Antireligioznik*, that the *parandzha* and *chachvan* were unhealthy and that they were the source of illness among women and children. The author maintained that they caused physical underdevelopment; that the high temperatures and lack of fresh air under the veil led to infections or even typhus; and that veiled women were frequent victims of traffic accidents because of their limited sight. The author concluded that only individuals attempting to undermine progress and modernity would support women's veiling and the continuation of women's seclusion and oppression.<sup>62</sup>

Activists also received instructions to talk about the inability of religious dogmas to provide correct explanations for phenomena such as the development of steam (for example, when a woman would make tea), the solar system, the radio, but also things as disease, or misfortune. Uzbek women would gradually come to understand

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<sup>58</sup> Ibragimov, *Antireligioznaia rabota sredi zhenshchin Vostoka*, 42.

<sup>59</sup> Ibragimov, *Antireligioznaia rabota sredi zhenshchin Vostoka*, 42.

<sup>60</sup> Ibragimov, *Kak vesti antireligioznuin propaganda sredi tatarok i bashkirok*, 20–23.

<sup>61</sup> Ibragimov, *Kak vesti antireligioznuin propaganda sredi tatarok i bashkirok*, 25–26.

<sup>62</sup> L.K. *Parandzha i chachvan*, in: *Antireligioznik* no. 2 (1939), 34–35.

that religion had denied them development, the truth, and the opportunity to think for themselves. They would realize that what happened in their lives was not part of some god's predetermined plan, but that instead, it could be explained by science and rational thinking, and that human beings in fact had control over their own fate. It would therefore be good for them to pursue education, start to think independently and "scientifically," and live the "cultured" Soviet way of life.<sup>63</sup> Moreover, women's education and their visits to antireligious activities would not only provide them insights in the danger and superfluity of religion, but would also physically distract them from religious practice and religious holidays.<sup>64</sup>

Attacks on the Muslim clergy were indeed quite prominent in Soviet antireligious propaganda. Apart from the above-mentioned inability of religious dogmas and superstition to give rational explanations for natural phenomena, there were two other frequently recurring themes, as well. The first was the "dangerous" character of Islam, supposedly a result of its historical development under the Russian Empire. Ibragimov argued that because of its subordinate position in the Empire, the Muslim clergy had assumed the role of the "clever, unreliable oppositionist"; the cultural and economic backwardness of the East turned religious superstition into extreme fanaticism unknown to other religions; and according to Ibragimov, it was a disturbing fact that Islam sought to control all spheres of Muslims' lives, even family life and prayer. He stressed that women's extreme backwardness had made them into easy victims of such barbarism, and that the Muslim clergy therefore had to be eliminated.<sup>65</sup>

Another argument against the Muslim spiritual leadership was that despite its recent attempts to appeal to women with promises of reforms, full women's equality within Islam was absolutely impossible. It was necessary, Ibragimov wrote, to make it quite clear to women that these were myths, only meant to keep the clergy's influence intact. After all, the right to visit the mosque would not improve women's position in the family and society, since they would still be veiled and locked up in the house, unable to develop themselves or contribute something meaningful to the socialist project. Therefore, Ibragimov argued, it was necessary to highlight the difference between on the one hand the old "byt", which he considered was informed for an important part informed by sharia, and on the other hand the Soviet efforts toward women's emancipation.<sup>66</sup> According to Soviet propaganda, Islam was thus static and monolithic (solely based on "the" sharia), misogynist, and inherently threatening and incapable of genuine reform. At the same time, the Soviet approach to women's emancipation also drew on strategies that the Muslim clergy used. This

<sup>63</sup> Ibragimov, *Kak vesti antireligioznuu propagandu sredi tatarok i bashkirok*, 25–26; Ibragimov, *Antireligioznaia rabota sredi zhenshchin Vostoka*, 45–46.

<sup>64</sup> Ibragimov, 'Antireligioznaia rabota sredi zhenshchin Vostoka', 44.

<sup>65</sup> Ibragimov, *Kak vesti antireligioznuu propagandu sredi tatarok i bashkirok*, 15–16.

<sup>66</sup> Ibragimov, *Antireligioznaia rabota sredi zhenshchin Vostoka*, 47–48.

was illustrated, for instance, by Kobetskii's remark that it was important that activists would not only understand the actions of the Muslim clergy, for example why it offered women more rights and organized women's group of its own, but that they also employed some of the same strategies to counter the clergy's influence.<sup>67</sup>

### Work Among Poor Women

A final major component of work among "Eastern" women was directed specifically at poor women. Already early on, Soviet ideologists understood the significance of such work. Ibragimov, for instance, argued that financial support and "enlightenment work" among poor women would make them sympathetic to the Soviet project, and would persuade them to become active builders of socialism. Moreover, they would understand that it was not religion or the Muslim clergy, but only their personal investment in self-development and Soviet society that had improved their financial and social situation and had made them strong and independent.<sup>68</sup> This was another example of Soviet attempts to appeal to the same group of (vulnerable) women as the clergy did, and compete with religious authorities by addressing the same social issues in women's lives. Ibragimov argued that support of poor women was especially important on religious holidays, because on these days religious people were particularly generous to those in need.

Financial support to poor women could take the shape of financial means from the Soviet Fund for the Poor, assistance of a woman to become a member of a trade union, join a cooperative, get an insurance, help to women to start a collective farm and purchase the necessary machinery and cattle, and other. The land reforms in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which were carried out from 1926 on, were also of major importance in this respect. While land ownership had previously been determined by marriage rights and followed the paternal line, after the reforms women received equal rights to land, and around 500 Uzbek women became independent land owners.<sup>69</sup> It was argued that these land reforms undercut the economic basis that had previously stimulated the backward practices of bride-price, polygyny, and child marriage among Muslims.<sup>70</sup> Meanwhile, while assisting the poor financially, and thus gaining access to them by means of goods, activists were instructed to conduct their cultural and political propaganda among these women, as well. Both in and outside women's clubs, activists were expected to make efforts towards ending poor Uzbek women's illiteracy, introducing them to "modern" Soviet life, and making them politically and socially active.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Kobetskii, *Ocherednye zadachi*, 19.

<sup>68</sup> Ibragimov, *Kak vesti antireligioznuin propaganda sredi tatarok i bashkirok*, 50.

<sup>69</sup> Liubimova, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, 36–37.

<sup>70</sup> Pal'vanova, *Docheri sovetskogo Vostoka*, 92–95.

<sup>71</sup> Ibragimov, *Antireligioznaia rabota sredi zhenshin Vostoka*, 46–47.

## Women's Spaces in the Soviet Modernization Campaign: a Reflection

This examination of the basic components of the Soviet women's liberation campaign in mid-1920s Soviet Uzbekistan shows that they were tied together quite closely, and that they were variations on the same themes, and part of the same set of goals. The overarching goal was to incorporate Uzbek women – and through them, Uzbek society as a whole – into the socialist project, by making their behavior and worldviews compatible with “modern” Soviet society. Achieving this was not merely a matter of informing women about the benefits of Soviet life, but also about “enlightening” them and making them feel the benefits of Soviet power. Activists also had to deal with the reality of women's existing loyalties toward Islam and Muslim authorities. In this respect, Soviet “atheism” seems to have meant primarily “non-religion,” or “anti-religion,” insofar religion was part of the old order. In their attempts to break women's ties with Islam, Soviet propaganda sought to discredit Islam and the Muslim clergy in any possible way. It presented its project as radically different from Islam and the old “byt” (“way of life”) as it could, and dismissed every attempt by the clergy to reform Islam in the favor of women. According to Soviet accounts, arguing that the old way of life was characterized by inequality, superstition, and suppression of the people by religious dogmas that blocked the development of society and the economy, Soviet society represented progress, equality, the victory of science and rational thinking over superstition.

In a similar way, the image of the “old” and the “new” Uzbek woman were defined as completely opposed to each other, with the backward, passive, religious, and suppressed woman, wrapped in darkness and without a face on the one hand, and the educated, engaged, healthy, and independent Soviet woman on the other hand. Apart from promoting “reason” over “superstition,” Soviet propaganda also assumed a strong moral component, viewing the old as morally “bad,” and the new as morally “good.” The old “byt” was related to filth, illness, and uncultured, unproductive behavior; the new “byt” in contrast, was presented as the example of cleanliness, sophistication, and, in extension, the ability to be a good, sane, and engaged person, citizen, and parent. This discourse of morality in Soviet propaganda made it increasingly difficult for opponents to argue that religion or tradition could be viable alternatives for the Soviet way of life.

In order to win Uzbek women over for the Soviet project, however, activists understood that they had to be careful in the ways they reached out; they had to develop an approach that was low profile, was of interest to women themselves, and did not all too radically dismiss the things in Uzbek women's lives that were important to them. This mindset resembles what Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock has argued regarding the state's approach to “atheism” in the Russian part of the Soviet Union from the Krushchev period on. She maintained that despite its ambitious modernizing goals, ideologists realized that spirituality and emotion were important

to Soviet citizens, and that the aesthetic, psychological, communal, and moral components of religious experience were precisely what connected people to religion. Rather than trying to eliminate these factors, state atheism had to study and incorporate them into its strategies.<sup>72</sup> In the Uzbek case, activists therefore created spaces where women would feel comfortable and that would not be suspicious to their husbands. They sought to attract women with advice, scarce goods, or resources that exceeded what the Muslim clergy offered; only after activists had gained these women's trust, they could gradually familiarize them with the Soviet way of life and "scientific worldview," and pull them away from the influence of religious authorities. In a way, the spaces that Soviet activists created for Uzbek women's emancipation embodied their strategies. They were safe, cozy, and empowering women-only spaces where women, "over a cup of tea," could relax, study, and develop themselves broadly. At the same time, these were also profoundly ordered, disciplining spaces, where women were constantly immersed in the Soviet discourse of values, manners, cleanliness, and morality more broadly.

### The "Hujum" (1927): Change or Continuity?

The "Hujum" ("nastuplenie" in Russian, and often translated as "assault" in English),<sup>73</sup> launched by the Communist Party on March 8<sup>th</sup> 1927 in cooperation with the Central Committee of the Sredazbiuro and the Uzbek Communist Party, signified a new phase in the Soviet campaign for the liberation of Uzbek women. As existing scholarship on this period has shown, from that moment on, the struggle with the old "byt" intensified and assumed a mass character. Scholars like Douglas Northrop, Marianne Kamp, and Shoshana Keller, have vividly described the violent and coercive aspects of the Soviet campaign in the 1920s. They have highlighted the occurrence of mass public unveilings of Uzbek women, which in turn led to violent responses from the side of offended husbands and family members, and which is often seen as the symbol of that phase of the campaign.

Sources indeed suggest that the campaign became more massive and controlled, and that unveiling became an increasingly important point of attention for ideologists and activists. Liubimova, for instance, wrote that whereas before the Hujum Party members in Uzbekistan did not differ much from the non-Party-affiliated masses, from 1927 on Party members were encouraged to "take off the veil from

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<sup>72</sup> Smolkin-Rothrock, Victoria, *"A Sacred Space is Never Empty": Soviet Atheism, 1954–1971*, Berkeley 2010, 8–10.

<sup>73</sup> This translation seems worth looking into more closely. In Russian, "nastuplenie" has a connotation that is closer to "offensive" or "struggle" (many Soviet sources use it interchangeably with the Russian word "bor'ba"), words that do not necessarily imply a *physical* attack. It is only in the English translation into "assault" that the concept explicitly suggests violence.

their wives' faces." After that, she remembered, thousands of peasant women and wives of workers also followed this example and unveiled, and despite its many attempts, the Muslim clergy could do nothing to stop this process.<sup>74</sup> The second All-Union Congress of Female Workers and Peasants and the Communist Party at its 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, called upon the working masses to protect unveiled women, and more generally all local Party members and organs were encouraged to contribute to women's liberation in Central Asia, and to help monitor the implementation of Soviet laws regarding the position of women in society. In 1928, a special Committee "for the improvement of women's work and life" ("po uluchsheniuu truda i byta zhenshchin"), consisting of activists, members of soviets and women's clubs, teachers, and Komsomol members, came into being to improve women's legal situation and to provide them legal support. Although veiling, for instance, had not officially been prohibited by law, the definition of "enemy of the people" was significantly expanded, and had come to include a variety of practices by men and the Islamic authorities that supposedly blocked women's emancipation.<sup>75</sup>

Another new aspect of the campaign after 1927 was the increasing attempt to attract the female masses to the workforce. This went hand in hand with developments in industrialization and collectivization in the Soviet center, and the preparations for the first Five Year Plan (1928). Collectivization and labor, it was argued, were a strong weapon in the struggle with the old "byt," for participation in the workforce ended women's isolation and "loneliness," and provided them the opportunity for political and economic self-determination. And through the empowerment of women, it would eventually be possible to resolve the region's backwardness.<sup>76</sup> Liubimova maintained that the Five Year Plan for the development of industry and agriculture in the Soviet East was to an important degree meant to open up the opportunity for tens of thousands of women to work. As the 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress decided, therefore, the focus would lie on those branches of industry that were considered suitable for Eastern women, such as textile and food processing, and carpet weaving. Women who started cooperatives received instruction and financial support, in particular those that had received parcels of land in the context of the land reforms.<sup>77</sup>

Yet at the same time, there seem to have been significant continuities in the Soviet approach to women's liberation in Uzbekistan, as well. The Communist Party and Sredazbiuro stressed that "since a rejection of external signs of reclusion did

<sup>74</sup> Liubimova, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, 19–20.

<sup>75</sup> Suvorova-Fedorova, M., *Trud i byt zhenshchin Vostoka. Materialy Vsesoiuznogo soveshchaniia komissii po uluchsheniuu byta zhenshchin Vostoka*. 11–17 ianvaria 1928, 11–16.

<sup>76</sup> Abidova, Dzhakhan, *Zhenshchina Uzbekistana v bor'be za svoe raskreposhchenie*, in: *Revolutsiia i Natsional'nosti* no. 3 (1936), 48.

<sup>77</sup> Liubimova, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, 21–22.



not necessarily lead to women's de facto liberation from reclusion ("zatvornichestvo")," the Hujum should not merely be reduced to "taking off the clothes of reclusion"; rather, it was about "surrounding every woman with an atmosphere of compassion and attention, and offer her support to stand firmly on her feet."<sup>78</sup> The idea was that it was important in this phase of the campaign to cherish and maintain the achievements that women's clubs, shops, and other facilities had made in the previous years, and to continue these central forms of activism among Eastern women, though with a more systematic approach, and with better trained activists.<sup>79</sup> The 15<sup>th</sup> Party Congress stressed that it was not only important for the cultural development of the East to expand Uzbek women's education and prepare more local female cadres, but also to advance the work in the sphere of motherhood and childcare further. More than anywhere else, the Congress argued, facilities such as nurseries, clinics, and schools, and farms, had to be used to strengthen the ties of the Party with non-Party female workers. Much like before 1927, activists received instructions to gather women for conversations and lectures, and after starting off with a topic of immediate interest to the women, to slowly turn the conversation to the achievements of the Party.<sup>80</sup>

To a large degree, the strategies and facilities for women's empowerment in Uzbekistan thus remained in place. Women's clubs and krasnye ugolki remained popular institutes. The role of the zhenotdel in these gradually decreased after 1927, however. Increasingly, factories, farms, cooperatives, unions, soviets, and the Komsomol were expected to create their own women's groups, and would carry out their own cultural-political "enlightenment work" among Uzbek women.<sup>81</sup> An argument for this was given, for instance, by Soviet ideologist N. A. Akopian, who wrote that "if women and girls, who had unveiled and had had a few years of education, returned to a kolkhoz that did not offer systematic enlightenment work with women, [these women] started wearing the parandzha again and forgot everything they had learned."<sup>82</sup> Factories, farms, and cooperatives became central settings not only in teaching Uzbek women the importance of labor itself, but women's presence in these spaces also provided activists the opportunity to inform them about the harmful aspects of the old "byt," and the benefits of Soviet society. Furthermore, factories and farms had facilities such as cinemas, schools, and libraries, and their dining halls and nurseries instructed Uzbek how to prepare "clean food" for their family,

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<sup>78</sup> Pal'vanova, *Emansipatsiia musul'manki*, 101.

<sup>79</sup> Liubimova, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, 46–47.

<sup>80</sup> Liubimova, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, 43–45.

<sup>81</sup> Tursunov, Kh. T. et al eds., *Khudzhum znachit nastuplenie*, Tashkent 1987, 75–85; Nuritov, A. N., *Politotdely MTS Uzbekistana v bor'be za vovlechenie zhenshchin v kolkhoznoe proizvodstvo (1933–1934 gg.)*, in: *Nauchnye Trudy* no. 212 (1962), 97–105.

<sup>82</sup> Akopian, *Perryi s'ezd zhenskoi trudiasheisia molodezhi Uzbekistana*, 112.

how to eat and behave in a sophisticated manner, or how to raise their child.<sup>83</sup> Soviet ideologists and activists expected that the fact that women were contracted directly (without the mediation of male family members), and earned their own money, would make them demand a stronger position within their household and family. Moreover, skills such as accounting and contracts that are required for industrial work would help women understand the importance of literacy and education. From this Liubimova concluded that the importance of women's participation in the workforce was not limited to the economic sphere. It also "distanced them from the old byt, and taught them a way of life based on new foundations, without them even being aware of it."<sup>84</sup>

In fact, it appears that the cultural significance of Uzbek women's participation in industry and agriculture was a major reason for attracting more women to the workforce in the first place, and may even have exceeded the importance given to these women's contribution to the economy and to industrial output. Whereas reports on the situation in the Russian part of the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s wrote extensively about the extraordinary achievements (whether or not reflecting the truth) of workers in factories and farms, such proud assertions were quite rare in writings on Uzbek industry in that same period. The Uzbek industrial sphere was limited, and it is the question whether it was even possible to expand it significantly. Liubimova wrote that although large numbers of Uzbek women were attracted to factories, there were often not enough positions to actually accommodate all these women. Furthermore, factory owners were not always interested in Uzbek women, especially older women, who supposedly did not have the right "work mentality." Therefore, as Liubimova argued, it was indispensable above all that the Eastern woman learned how to be disciplined and "cultured," and that they understood the benefits of labor for their own development, and the importance of their devotion to the greater Socialist cause.<sup>85</sup>

## Reflecting on the Meaning of the "New Soviet Woman" in the Uzbek Context

The Soviet approach to Uzbek women's emancipation shows many similarities, yet also profound differences with the Russian case in the early Soviet period. In both cases, women's legal equality and equal opportunities in the public sphere, and encouragement of women's education, financial and social independence, political and social engagement, and participation in the workforce, were prominent aspects of

<sup>83</sup> Liubimova, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, 28–29.

<sup>84</sup> Liubimova, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, 31–32.

<sup>85</sup> Liubimova, *Rabota partii sredi truzhenits Vostoka*, 26–28.

Soviet propaganda. At the same time, however, Soviet propaganda in Uzbekistan was to a significant degree adjusted to local circumstances and concerns. As the Soviet leadership and activists argued, the strategies for strengthening the position of women “must take into account the specific circumstances of the Eastern periphery.”<sup>86</sup> In contrast to the center of the Soviet Union, for instance, Soviet activists in Central Asia hardly mentioned issues such as divorce and abortion, nor did the Soviet leadership argue for the “withering away” of the family and the complete take-over of childcare and household tasks by the state.<sup>87</sup> The new Uzbek Soviet woman was educated, cultured, and politically aware, but women’s emancipation was still defined within the framework of strong family relations. Much of the “enlightenment” work among women, including medical consultation and legal support, was aimed at eliminating other sources of authority such as religion from this framework, and at making “modern” Soviet women, wives, and mothers who would be engaged and loyal to the state.

That the matter of women’s emancipation was formulated differently in Uzbekistan and in Soviet Russia also appears from the sources on Uzbek women’s participation in the workforce. In the Soviet center, industrial and agricultural production were crucial for the construction of the country, and there every Soviet citizen was expected to contribute and work long hours, often under harsh circumstances. An entire cult was developed around the Soviet worker, in order to increase workers’ motivation to work harder. As mentioned above, however, the situation for Uzbek women was profoundly different. In Uzbekistan, keeping women “busy,” and the opportunities for “enlightenment work” and distraction from religious practice that women’s physical presence in factories, farms, and other cooperatives provided seem to have been at least as (if not more) important as their contribution to industrial output.<sup>88</sup>

What the considerations were for this distinct approach does not become entirely clear from Party decrees and activists’ writings on work among women. Occasionally, some aspects of the campaign were described as compromises. For example, it was mentioned that a “small deviation from the principle of mixed education” was needed in Central Asia for a short period of time, since forcing mixed education in the East would lead to high numbers of girls and women abandoning their education.<sup>89</sup> For the most part, however, it seems that adjusting Soviet propaganda and activism was considered more as a pragmatic choice than as a weakness,

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<sup>86</sup> Niurina, F., *Usilit’ podgotovku kul’turnykh kadrov Vostoka*, in: *Kommunistka* no. 5–6 (1929), 22–23.

<sup>87</sup> See Wendy Goldman’s book *Women, the State, and Revolution* on the campaign for women’s emancipation in the Russian part of the Soviet Union.

<sup>88</sup> Ibragimov, *Antireligioznaia rabota sredi zhenscbim Vostoka*, 48–49.

<sup>89</sup> Niurina, *Usilit’ podgotovku kul’turnykh kadrov Vostoka*, 23–24; Smirnova, A., *Zhenskoe obrazovaniie v Uzbekistane*, in: *Kommunistka* no. 8 (1928), 82–83.

and that there were no concrete plans to change this approach radically in the 1920s or early 1930s. This may have had to do with a conviction that Central Asia was simply too backward for an approach similar to Russian part of the Soviet Union. Or it could have been part of Terry Martin's more friendly explanation that the Soviet leadership believed that the best strategy for preparing all the peoples of the Soviet Union for true Socialism, was by letting them develop their "national consciousness"; though one that was decidedly "national in form, but Socialist in content."<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion

The goal of this research has been to provide an insight into the new society Soviet ideologists and activists pursued in early Soviet Uzbekistan, and into the cautious strategies they imagined would be most effective for this goal. As a result, there are also important questions that this perspective and source base explicitly do not answer. First and foremost, my research is a history of an approach, and does not make claims as to how Soviet strategies played out in practice, and how successful they were. This would be an interesting avenue for further research. Other points of departure could be the role of zhenotdel activists in shaping the Communist Party's policies for Uzbekistan on the ground, or how Party decisions regarding the "modernization" of Uzbekistan fitted within larger ideological debates about Soviet nationality policy and the pace of societal transformation.

In this paper, I have argued that central to the Soviet campaign for Uzbek women's liberation and emancipation in the 1920s and early 1930s was a cautious, non-coercive approach. Whereas much of the earlier scholarship on this campaign has focused on the Hujum of 1927–1929, and the mass unveilings and violent backlash that occurred in this context, I have contended that this coercion and violence (in their physical manifestations) were an exception to the general Soviet approach in the region; and that both the leadership and activists primarily considered the Hujum as a project to consolidate and improve existing practices, and to intensify and extend the scope of the campaign. Throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s, women's clubs and shops, antireligious groups, and support to poor women were major vehicles for Soviet outreach work among women in the region. With a warm, safe, and welcoming atmosphere, and by providing goods, resources, and medical and legal support, activists sought to obtain Uzbek women's trust, time, and attention. Activists understood that only once a relationship of trust was established with both women and their relatives, they could go ahead and educate these women, and gradually persuade them of the benefits of the "modern" Soviet way of life – at the expense other, mostly religious, authority. Upon close inspection it

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<sup>90</sup> Martin, Terry, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939*, Ithaca 2001.

appears that this strategy, even though it did not include physical abuse, was nevertheless meant to discipline Uzbek women profoundly, and to constrain their thoughts and actions. It is therefore important to keep in mind at all times that control and power can be exercised in many different ways, and that coercion and violence are complex concepts with a large grey area beyond their clearly physical forms.

The “new Soviet Uzbek woman” that was to be shaped in Soviet Uzbekistan at that time differed in multiple respects from the “new woman” in Soviet Russia. Whereas the ideal imagined for the latter was radical independence from all social and economic family ties, the new Uzbek woman, though modern, intelligent, and independent in thought and action, continued to be imagined within the network of the family, as a wife and mother. This suggests that multiple “cultural revolutions” occurred in the early Soviet Union in different contexts. Upon closer inspection, however, their differences notwithstanding, the cases of Soviet Russia and Uzbekistan were part of the same set of overarching goals: rigorous social transformation and modernization of society, and the creation of a new order with loyal, engaged citizens, and with the Communist Party as the only and undisputed authority in all spheres of life. Even though social and family relations were kept in existence in form, Soviet power sought to extend its influence precisely to the sphere of such relations, and to monitor and control them. Even the most intimate of relations were thus kept in check and in line with the Party’s main objectives, and outreach work among women was crucial in this respect. Even if an Uzbek woman was knitting or drinking tea at a woman’s club rather than working long hours in a factory and earning her own salary, she was still immersed in the Soviet order and worldview, and distracted from religious practice. As long as she looked to the state rather than to religious figures for support and advice, became an active participant in the Socialist project, respected Soviet ideals for order and morality, and continued to give birth to new Soviet children, the state’s major goals were achieved.

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