

From Colonial Oppression to Socialist Construction

Reviewed by JOSEPH FREEMAN

A COMBINATION of Marxist intellectual discipline with a lyric gift has imparted to Joshua Kunitz' study of Soviet Asia* unique literary qualities. This book, the first on the subject to appear in English, gives us at once a history of the Bolshevik Revolution in Bokhara, an analysis of Communist theory and practice in regard to the oppressed nations, vivid portraits of personalities on both sides of the struggle, a dramatic narrative of the transformation of a people, striking paintings of their environment, and the flavor of their poetry. The author has succeeded in weaving basic economic, political, social and cultural factors into the full story of an exploited backward people marching through painful struggle from feudalism toward Socialism.

As a man of letters, Kunitz is sensitive to the romantic aspects of Bokhara; as a Marxist, he understands and applies the excellent advice of the local Bolshevik leader Khodzhaiev, who warns him not to emphasize the exotic in that ancient land, but to observe the new rising alongside the old, to grasp the significance of the extraordinary advances in agriculture, industry, sanitation, culture and daily life.

Stalin has pointed out that as compared with all the colonial and semi-colonial countries in the East, the Soviet Republics in Central Asia have the following distinguishing characteristics: (1) they are free from the imperialist yoke; (2) their national development proceeds not under the guidance of a bourgeois but of a Soviet Power; (3) in so far as they are as yet industrially backward, they can count on the industrial proletariat of the most advanced republics in the Soviet Union to aid them in accelerating their industrial development; (4) being free from the colonial yoke, being under the protection of the proletarian dictatorship and being members of the Soviet Union, these republics can be drawn into the Socialist upbuilding of the country.

Furthermore, the course of the Socialist revolution in Central Asia has great international significance, particularly in its solution of the national question. The entire Orient watches events in that region—and western imperialism more than watches the Orient. Conscious of the general implications of his theme, Kunitz has dedicated his volume to the Negro people of the United States, themselves occupying in this country a status in some ways analogous to that of the colonial people. His narrative, detailed, documented and dramatic, shows us the destruction of the feudal system by a revolution which begins with national liberation as its first objective; and the stages through which a liberated colonial country, skipping the capitalist phase of development, passes from a primitive natural economy to the beginnings of socialism.

* *Dawn Over Samarkand: The Rebirth of Central Asia*, by Joshua Kunitz. International Publishers, New York. \$1.90.

Here Kunitz distinguishes himself from the "impartial" anti-Soviet writers by the thoroughness with which he describes *pre-revolutionary* conditions in Bokhara. This gives us the first standard by which to measure the progress of the revolution. His numerous citations from the writings and speeches of Lenin and Stalin and from Communist Party documents gives us the second necessary standard—the goal toward which the Socialist revolution is moving.

Prior to the revolution, Kunitz points out, Bokhara was the citadel of Arabian-Persian culture, the heart of Islam in Middle Asia. It was a theocracy in which the Moslem clergy, headed by the Emir, was omnipotent, controlling education, justice and domestic relations. Wealthy, disciplined, absolute, the clergy crushed every sign of intellectual independence among the people, every tendency toward secular education and science, for fear these might undermine the established order.

The Emir, who exercised supreme authority in all things spiritual, also wielded absolute temporal power. All offices, national and local, were under his direct control.

Bokhara was a feudal land whose vast riches and national treasury were the personal property of the Emir. As is usually the case under these circumstances, the Emir did nothing to develop industry, commerce or agriculture in Bokhara. The entire country contained not a single theater, only one privately owned movie, three small hospitals, and a few badly paved streets in the capital. Nothing was spent on irrigation, roads, bridges, schools or sanitation.

The tsarist empire, which had annexed Central Asia in the 'sixties and 'seventies, avoided here the policy of Russification which it followed in the Ukraine and Poland. Russian imperialism in Central Asia, like French imperialism in Algeria, legally and geographically segregated the native peoples from the Russian invaders, and confined itself to the essential factor of *economically* exploiting the natives through their native rulers. As Russian capitalism expanded, the tsarist regime converted Turkestan, and to a lesser degree Bokhara and Khiva, into sources of raw materials for Russian industry. For this purpose, tsarism artificially blocked the development of native manufactures, prohibiting the manufacture of textiles altogether.

This policy of necessity modified the economy of the Bokharan villages. Industrial crops, especially cotton, began to play an increasingly important role: Russian capitalists bought raw cotton from the Bokhara peasants and sold them manufactured goods. To facilitate these imports and exports, they opened banks, trading posts, and commercial offices, thereby transforming the natural economy of Bokhara into an exchange economy.

The growth of commercial capital disintegrated the feudal and patriarchal relations of the colonial country. The peasant masses, already ground down by the exploitation of their own aristocracy, were still further pauperized. The village population was sharply divided into the extremely poor, the landless and the tenant farmers at the one end, and at the other the rapidly prospering landlords and kulaks. Under capitalist conditions, cotton-growing proved to be disastrous for the mass of the natives. The poorer peasants were compelled to obtain advance credits in order to grow cotton, chiefly from private cotton firms and individual usurers. Unpaid mortgages led to foreclosures, with the result that a vast army of landless peasants wandered from region to region in search of jobs. Only the richer peasants,

the kulaks and beys, found cotton growing profitable; they alone could raise that crop without resorting to loans.

For the majority of native peasants, the transition from primitive natural economy to commercial farming under imperialist conditions caused infinite suffering and widespread ruin. As wealth became more and more concentrated in the hands of the Russian bankers, the native money leaders, the Emir and the beys, the poverty of the mass of the people increased.

The great social ferment which followed the Russo-Japanese War, and whose high point was the 1905 Revolution, spread from the center of the empire to the backward minority peoples. The intellectuals in Bokhara and Turkestan avidly read the nationalist press of the Tatars and Tyurks of the Volga, the Crimea and the Caucasus, and from it borrowed the name *Djadid*—the New—for the nationalist societies which sprang up in Central Asia. At first the Djadid movement was purely cultural and legal, agitating merely for secular education and a few minor administrative reforms. Under the impact of the national revolution in Turkey and Persia in 1908, Djadidism became more political, and consequently was driven underground.

The February Revolution in the empire brought the Djadids into the open. The Provisional Government in Petrograd sent dispatches to the Emir urging immediate reforms and then forgot about Central Asia. It did not even appoint its own representative but retained Miller, appointed by the tsar. Miller, needless to say, cooperated with the Emir in breaking the Djadid movement. The more revolutionary elements thereupon organized the Young Bokhara Party whose program called for the overthrow of the Emir.

What might have been a purely national movement, similar to that in Turkey, Persia and China was altered by the October Revolution. From Petrograd the newly established Soviet Government issued its Declaration of People's Rights which announced (1) the final and irrevocable liberation of all the peoples who had suffered under the despotism of the tsar, (2) the guarantee of the equality and sovereignty of all the peoples of Russia, (3) the right of all the peoples in Russia to self-determination, including the right to separation and the formation of independent states, (4) the abolition of all national and religious privileges and restrictions, (5) the free development of the national minorities and ethnographic groups inhabiting Russian territory. Several days later there came the Soviet Government's Proclamation to the Mohamedans of Russia and the Orient, signed by Lenin and Stalin. This document declared that henceforth Moslem beliefs and customs, national institutions and cultures were free and inviolable. The peoples of the Moslem East were urged to build their national lives free and unhampered. These rights, like the rights of all the peoples of Russia, were under the powerful protection of the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers' and Peasants' Deputies.

From the sharply divided society of Bokhara, which Kunitz analyzes on a class basis in lucid detail, these declarations of the Soviet Government evoked contrary responses. The Emir and the upper clergy and officialdom correctly feared that the Bolsheviks, spokesmen of the revolutionary Russian masses, would deal with the Young Bokharans, spokesmen of the Bokharan people. Opinion among the Djadids and Young Bokharans ranged from bourgeois nationalism to Bolshevik internationalism. The bourgeois nationalist Djadids wanted to overthrow the Emir, break away from Bolshevik Russia, establish a constitutional democratic republic and start on an ambitious career

of native capitalist development with native capital guaranteed every advantage. They feared that after abolishing all vestiges of the old empire, the Bolsheviks would create "their own—Red, but Russian—empire". The more revolutionary Djadids believed in the sincerity of the Bolsheviks, pointing out that self-determination was not a Bolshevik "trick" but an old Marxist idea dating back to *The Communist Manifesto* and reiterated by congresses of the Second International at London, Paris, Amsterdam and Stuttgart. These ideas had been again reiterated, with specific application to Russia, at the April Conference of the Bolsheviks seven months before they came into power.

In these ideas there was seeming contradiction. The Bolsheviks spoke in the same breath of *separation*, and of its apparent opposite, *unification*.

Stalin clarified this apparent contradiction when he pointed out how the national policy of the proletariat differs from that of the bourgeoisie. The motive and aim of the slogan of self-determination as raised by the Bolsheviks is unification. The April Theses made it clear that the question of the *right* of nations to secede freely from the Socialist Federation under the Soviet regime is not to be confused with the question of the *expediency* of secession of one or another nation at one or another moment; the question of expediency must in each separate instance be determined in entire independence by the party of the proletariat in accordance with the interests of general development and of the proletarian class struggle for socialism.

This policy of the Communists is not confined to the U.S.S.R. Aptly, Kunitz cites the Comintern resolution on the Negro question in the United States which distinguishes between the right of separation of the Negro people from the federal government of this country and the expediency of exercising that right in *all* circumstances. Here the policy of the Communists varies according to the specific conditions. If the proletariat comes into power in the United States, the *right* of the Negroes to governmental separation will be unconditionally realized; the Communist Party will give the Negro population of the Black Belt freedom of choice in this as in other questions. But the Communist Negroes will naturally oppose separation from the American Socialist federation; the Communists will seek to convince the Negro masses that it is much better and to the interest of the Negro nation for the Black Belt to be a free republic, where the Negro majority has complete right of self-determination but remains governmentally federated with the great proletarian republic of the United States. The bourgeois counter-revolution, on the other hand, will then be interested in promoting separatist tendencies among the various nationalities in order to utilize separatist nationalism as a barrier for the bourgeois counter-revolution against the consolidation of the proletarian dictatorship.

With a wealth of detail Kunitz describes just how this sort of thing happened in Bokhara. To the bourgeoisie of Central Asia, which constituted the Right-wing of the Djadid movement, national self-determination meant a democratic republic giving them unrestricted opportunity to develop native industry and trade and to exploit their poorer compatriots without Russian interference or competition. They hated the Emir and the clerical-feudal regime because these had worked hand in hand with the tsarist oppressor to the detriment of the native bourgeoisie; but they hated Bolshevism even more, because Bolshevism looked upon the worker and peasant masses, and not upon the bourgeoisie, as the real exponents of the national will. The bourgeoisie in Bokhara, as everywhere else in the world, identified the "national" interest with its own interest; Bolshevism everywhere identified

the national interest with the interest of the overwhelming majority of the nation—the laborers, farmers and intellectual workers.

The liberal Djadids chose the “lesser evil”; they allied themselves with the feudal-clerical forces under the Emir, and in the effort to escape a “red imperialism” which never existed outside their fantasies they threw themselves into the arms of British imperialism which was very much alive in Asia. The proletarian revolution in Central Asia—as in Russia itself, and later in China—was compelled to fight the native exploiter babbling about national “freedom” and his imperialist ally, hungry for further annexations and spheres of influence.

The struggle for power in Bokhara, long and complicated, is brilliantly described by Kunitz, who manages at the same time to draw the necessary political lessons. He points out that if the Emir was able to maintain himself in Bokhara for three years after adjacent Turkestan had a Bolshevik government, it was due, in part, to the weaknesses of the local Communist Party, to the lack of harmony between the Russian Communists and the few native Communist workers and intellectuals.

The technique of the imperialists in a colonial country is to cooperate with the native rulers in exploiting the native masses; the technique of a proletarian revolutionary party in a colonial peasant country must be to attract the peasant masses, to win them away from reactionary, feudal, clerical influences. This requires unqualified cooperation with the native masses in eradicating both the foreign and the native exploiters.

The Russian Bolshevik—like the Yankee organizer in a Latin American country, or a British Bolshevik in India, or a white Communist among the Negro sharecroppers of the South—had to win the confidence of the native masses, convince them of his sincerity, impress them with his tact, his sympathy and his familiarity with local conditions. The least trace of prejudice or patronage on his part, Kunitz points out, was bound to arouse resentment and suspicion on the part of oppressed peoples accustomed to hate and distrust the “superior” race as a whole, without distinction as to class or political creed. Lenin warned the Russian Communists that in Central Asia the name Russian was, for obvious reasons, synonymous with *oppressor*, therefore the Russian Communist must cleanse himself of all traces of chauvinism.

Unfortunately, some of the Russian Bolsheviks in Bokhara adopted a superior attitude toward the Moslem workers at first and tried to keep them out of social and political activity. This disastrous policy was counteracted by a resolution adopted by the First Congress of the Communist Party of Turkestan, in June 1918, which urged “complete confidence in the Moslem workers” and their admission into the Red Army.

The overthrow of the Emir in 1920, after three years of bitter civil war, resulted in the establishment of the Soviet Republic of Bokhara. Six months later, on March 4, 1921, the new state entered into a series of agreements with the Russian Socialist Federation of Soviet Republics (R.S.F.S.R.)—the U.S.S.R. was not formed until December, 1922. In these agreements, the R.S.F.S.R. renounced “the colonial policy of the former capitalist governments of Russia for which the laboring masses of Bokhara, like other nations of the East, have always been an object of exploitation”. It also recognized “without reservation, the self government and complete independence of the Bokhara Soviet Republic with all the consequences deriving therefrom”. One of these consequences was the unconditional right of Bokhara

not to join the R.S.F.S.R. or to secede from it after it had joined. Soviet Bokhara chose *not* to join. Its agreement with the R.S.F.S.R. was a "treaty of alliance" based on the premise that "there can be no conflict of interest among the toiling masses of all countries", and that the "betterment of the workers' existence is rendered possible solely by their struggles in common and uniting their forces against the imperialist bourgeoisie of the world". The preamble to the agreement further declared that the "working masses, after having eliminated the possibility of exploiting each other, are interested in strengthening the productive forces".

In this spirit, the R.S.F.S.R. agreed to aid Bokhara in establishing and developing its own industrial and other economic enterprises by supplying the latter with all the necessary materials and implements of production. It further agreed to supply the necessary contingents of engineers, technicians, hydro-electricians and other experts for organizing mining, manufacturing and irrigation in Bokhara, and to send instructors, including military instructors, with a knowledge of the native languages, teachers, school manuals, literature, printing equipment, etc. Moreover, in order to give Bokhara immediate aid for the restoration and development of its economic life, the R.S.F.S.R. loaned it "an unredeemable subsidy"—that is, a subsidy which Bokhara would not have to repay.

This agreement was fulfilled. It revealed in action, as well as in theory, the difference between imperialist and Communist policy in regard to the oppressed races and nationalities. The right to separation instead of forcible annexation, the development of national economy instead of its arrest for the purpose of maintaining a source of raw materials, cheap labor and a market for finished goods, education of the masses instead of compulsory illiteracy and ignorance, "unredeemable subsidies" instead of heavy taxes, tributes, bribes and the kind of loans which keep Cuba, Nicaragua and other Latin American countries in perpetual peonage to the big banks of the United States.

The second phase of the Bokharan revolution was marked by the military struggle with the British-backed movement for the restoration of the old regime. This struggle consumed wealth, energy and strength, but it had this favorable political result: it intensified the process of class differentiation in the cities and villages of western and central Bokhara. Poor and middle peasants, in direct contact with the counter-revolution, lost faith in its nationalist and religious slogans, and swung hostility or neutrality toward the revolution into active sympathy with it, forming partisan detachments and cooperating with the Red Army. By 1923 there was a large organization of poor and middle peasants—the Peasants Union—crystallizing peasant opposition to the beys, kulaks, and mullahs. In the cities there was a similar process: Bokhara, where organized labor was hardly known, now had trade unions of builders, teachers, weavers, unskilled workers, and artisans, whose influence in revolutionizing the masses was great.

Constructive work was carried on simultaneously with the military defense of Soviet Bokhara against the counter-revolution. Achievements in this period are impressive when we consider what Bokhara was under the feudal-clerical regime and the havoc wrought by Civil War. The exchange of commodities between city and village was considerably improved; state trading centers were in operation; various commercial enterprises were launched with the participation of private capital, there was an increase in the exports of raw materials to and manufactured goods from Russia, three banks were established, railway, telegraph and telephone communications destroyed by the

Civil War were rebuilt and state revenues grew considerably. Twenty-eight per cent of these revenues were spent on education in 1923. The U.S.S.R. sent 160 doctors and 154 nurses to Bokhara, drugs were imported from Germany and Russia, and the Institute of Tropical Medicine was established, which drastically reduced malaria in the country and practically eliminated it from the city of Bokhara.

Such measures won the peasantry over to the revolution, and spelt the doom of the restoration movement. The years 1924-25 brought to a close the second phase of the Bokharan revolution. The delegates to the Fifth All-Bokharan Congress reported a 100 per cent increase in the cotton area as compared with 1923, and marked advances in agriculture as a whole, in cattle raising, in imports and exports, in irrigation, in government commercial enterprises. These advances were made under the most difficult conditions as a direct result of breaking up the old feudal-clerical-imperialist order, deliberately skipping the capitalist stage of historical development, and pursuing a more or less Socialist course, guided by Marxist-Leninist theory and aided by the proletariat of the other Soviet republics. The Congress signalized these achievements by changing the name of the country to the *Socialist* Soviet Republic of Bokhara. The addition of the word "Socialist" indicated the ideological growth of the native leaders, their acceptance of the Bolshevik thesis as to the Socialist character of the Bokharan revolution, and their readiness to join the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics.

This last had important bearing on the solution of the national question. In addition to the hostility between the Russian and Central Asian masses which the revolution had removed, there were strained relations among the various peoples who for centuries had lived under the Emir in mutual antagonism—Uzbeks, Kazaks, Tadzhiks, Turkomans and Kirgiz. The problem was further complicated by the fact that the nationalities comprising Bokhara also inhabited other Central Asian Soviet republics. All these peoples wanted self-determination. Uzbek supremacy was resented by the other national groups in Bokhara, and the tendency of all of these was to exaggerate rather than minimize national distinctions. The only remedy for the intense chauvinism inherited from the past was to break up all the Central Asian Soviet States into smaller units on the basis of ethnic, cultural, and national kinship, and to reassemble those units into distinct national republics. The entry of Bokhara into the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics made such a reorganization possible. The old geographical divisions were altered—so that the needs of federation and national autonomy were both satisfied—an act unprecedented in history. Bolshevism alone was able to achieve that self-determination of peoples which leads to unity.

This is the background against which Kunitz traces the course of the Socialist revolution in Central Asia during the past decade, and more particularly after the inauguration of the Five-Year Plan. Although I have, for obvious reasons, dwelt on the earlier period in which an oppressed colonial country was transformed into an autonomous Soviet republic, the bulk of Kunitz' book deals with more recent years and with conditions today. It is a thrilling and instructive narrative of economic transformation, profound advances in social, family, and personal relations, and a revolution in the cultural life of a once miserable and backward race.

Under Soviet conditions, agriculture, especially cotton growing, has grown by leaps and bounds; the output of heavy industry has increased 600 per cent since 1925, and electric power 500 per cent since 1928. Oil, coal,

lead, copper—all *discovered since the Revolution, thanks to planned Soviet geology*—form the basis of a rapidly expanding fuel and metallurgical industry. Millions of rubles have been spent on new roads, schools, hospitals, theaters, movies, newspapers, magazines and books, and illiteracy has been drastically reduced.

Nor does our author ignore difficulties, mistakes and excesses. But where the “impartial” anti-Soviet historian gives *only* the difficulties, mistakes and excesses, Kunitz places these in their proper perspective, explaining just why they took place, just how they were overcome. We are thus enabled to understand what would otherwise remain a mystery, namely how, in spite of all the difficulties and mistakes, including the “dizziness from success” from which local Bolsheviks suffered in the collectivization campaign, Soviet Central Asia, like the U.S.S.R. as a whole, has made such enormous progress at a time when the rest of the world stagnates economically and disintegrates culturally.

Among the most dramatic sections of the narrative are those which deal with the emancipation of the Central Asian woman from the mosque, the veil and the patriarchal domination of father and husband and her entrance as man’s equal in agriculture, industry, government, education and art. The solution of this problem by the Bolshevik Revolution indicates similar possibilities for the oppressed women of India, China, and Latin America; and it is greatly to Kunitz’ credit that he has told this story with deep human feeling, as well as political clarity. The book as a whole is not only an important contribution to the study of the Socialist Revolution in the Soviet Union, but is first-rate documentary evidence that Communism is the only solution for the colonial problem, the sole road to freedom for the oppressed races and nationalities of the world.

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