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The Soviet Union as a 'Feminist Colonialist?' The Women's Question in Early Soviet Central Asia

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Abstract

The Soviet Union as a colonial power in Central Asia decided to step up against the perceived traditional marginalisation of women. It intended to create an equal society for men and women, and treated women as important allies in the modernisation and the restructuration of traditional societies. However, in reality, while the Soviet initiatives contributed to the emancipation and empowerment of women on the surface, in the meantime they also served as a significant tool for the colonisation of Central Asia. The aim of the article is to shed light on this almost entirely overlooked process of the Soviet colonial power using the ideas of Marxist feminism to strengthen its power over the region, and to argue that this approach had contributed to the fact that the attempts of the Soviet Union aimed at the emancipation and empowerment of Central Asian women could only reach their declared objectives on the surface.

Keywords: colonialism, feminism, Marxism, civilising mission, Soviet Union, Central Asia, women

Introduction

The words 'colonialism' and 'feminism' usually appear together in the colourful contexts of the different branches of postcolonial feminism, generally referring to the complex marginalisation of women in the major frameworks and microstructures of colonialization, or to their struggles to emancipate and empower themselves through the elimination of the constraints and burdens stemming from the colonial thought. Postcolonial feminists generally understand "colonialism (and its legacy) and neo-colonialism as one of the most important obstacles for the attainment of the more

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egalitarian and just world," and put emphasis on "women as the group who will not only benefit most from the changed world but also lead this particular historical transformation of humanity in the future" (Sunder Rajan and Park, 2000: 67). The most well-known classics of this literature, such as Mohanty's "Under Western Eyes" (1984) and Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985) discuss the traditional Western ways of colonialism and its tools to silence and subjugate women.

Is it possible to imagine a colonial power which, instead of silencing and subjugating women, argues for their emancipation and empowerment? A colonial power which agrees with the postcolonial idea that women can act as the leading force of a historical transformation? In fact, there is a much less discussed and quite controversial case where the notions of colonialism and feminism appear together in a rather different context: the case of Soviet Central Asia in the 1920s–1930s, where the state intended to apply the ideas of Marxist feminism in practice, in the name of a 'civilising mission'. In this process, the Soviet Union as a colonial power in Central Asia[2] seemingly acted against the perceived traditional marginalisation of women. It intended to create an equal society for men and women, and treated women as one of its most important allies in the modernisation and the restructuration of traditional societies. However, in reality, while these acts indeed contributed to the emancipation and empowerment of women on the surface, in the meantime they also served as a significant tool for the colonisation of Central Asia. The aim of the article is to shed light on this almost entirely overlooked process of the Soviet colonial power using the ideas of Marxist feminism to strengthen its power over the region, and to argue that this approach had contributed to the fact that the attempts of the Soviet Union aimed at the emancipation and empowerment of Central Asian women could only reach their declared objectives on the surface.[3]

[2] There is a wide range of academic literature on the question of whether the Soviet Union can be considered as a colonial power or not (e.g. Wheeler, 1958; Benningsen, 1969; Moore, 2001; Northrop, 2004; Pianciola–Sartori, 2007; Khalid, 2007; Teichman, 2007), especially as the official state discourse portrayed the Soviet Union as a *post*colonial power. In this article, the author agrees with the branch of literature which claims that the Soviet Union was certainly a colonial-type power with a colonial mindset, and the post-Soviet region still has to face the consequences of its colonial practices, thus qualifying as a subject of post-colonial studies. However, the Soviet tools, methods and institutions were different from those of the traditional Western colonial powers (as in the case of its predecessor, Tsarist Russia, the practices of which the Soviet Union often followed), therefore it is not possible to put them into the same category of analysis (Khalid, 2007).

[3] Of course, this is not to state that the comprehensive Soviet modernisation programme did not have significant and statistically measurable positive outcomes, especially concerning women's participation in the political, economic and cultural life of Central Asia (see, for example, Lubin, 1981).

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The Soviet 'civilising mission' in Central Asia

Colonial powers, in general, aim at winning the "hearts and minds" of traditional societies, or, if it is not possible, they aim at the deconstruction the traditional ties of these societies, in order to make place for their own new structures. Women, as the transmitters of traditions and the maintainers of family honour, may act as powerful allies in both cases – or, if they resist the influence of the conquering power, can turn into major and inescapable enemies as well (Sered, 1990; Scott, 1996; Inglehart and Baker, 2000).

The Soviet Union was undeniably a colonial-style power in Central Asia. When the Bolshevik revolution ousted the Tsarist regime, one of the main concerns of the new leadership was the status of Central Asia. On the basis of Marxist-Leninist ideology, Soviet leaders were aware of their assumed moral duty to refuse and condemn the former colonial-imperial Tsarist rule over this area, while in practice, the newly established Soviet state needed the wide range of resources in the region for its consolidation. Under the label of a 'civilising mission' aiming at bringing modernity to the traditional societies of Central Asia, the new regime could ensure its political, economic and cultural influence over the region, while the proposed empowerment of 'backward' societies met the requirements of the Marxist-Leninist ideology dominated by teleological thought about the development of mankind (Khalid, 2006; Hirsch, 2005).

The subsequent attack on traditional relations had a special focus on Central Asian women, framed in the form of the so-called 'women's question' (*zhenskii vopros*). The expressly Marxist feminist state discourse about the emancipation and empowerment of women got intertwined with the process of the 'civilising mission', and it also involved an attempt to change the very core of Central Asian societies to the image and the benefit of the colonializing power. In this way, Central Asian women became the targets of Soviet policies for two main reasons. First, they were considered as the natural supporters of Soviet emancipation and empowerment, and natural allies in the fight for a new Soviet lifestyle (Massell, 1974). Second, as women in traditional societies in general, they were perceived as holding the key to the core values of their society, contributing significantly to the preservation of the traditional bonds and networks which strengthened the cohesion and perseverance of Central Asian societies. Thus, with the empowerment of women, both of the key colonial aims were supposed to be fulfilled: first, winning the 'hearts and minds' of traditional societies; and second, deconstructing the traditional ties and networks within these societies, in order to make place for the new Soviet structures.

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Marxism and feminism in the Soviet Union: A 'feminist colonialist'?

In the Soviet case, however, the motivations of the civilising mission emancipating and empowering women were more complex than in the case of classical colonial powers, or in well-known examples of modernisation projects. The Communist Manifesto had already indicated a strong commitment of the Communist movement to set women free from their patriarchal chains, rooted in the capitalist mode of production. The Manifesto argues that

> "the bourgeois sees his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to the women. Bourgeois marriage is, in reality, a system of wives in common (…) it is self-evident that the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e., of prostitution both public and private" (Communist Manifesto, 1848: 25).

Engels' book, titled *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, published in 1884, further elaborated on the criticisms of the traditional family and the traditional roles of women within it. Engels argues that the subordinated place of women in traditional gender hierarchies is a social construct, and a revolution can bring the liberation of women from the constraints of capitalism and its patriarchal societies. He assumed that women's participation in the wage labour force is of key importance for emancipation and empowerment (Engels, 1884). In the meantime, Marxist feminism put a great emphasis on the elimination of the double burden of working women stemming from their parallel roles at work and in the household. According to Aleksandra Kollontai, one of the most iconic figures of early Marxist feminism, "capitalism has placed a crushing burden on woman's shoulders: it has made her a wage-worker without having reduced her cares as housekeeper or mother" (Kollontai, 1920).

Although most of the main ideas of Marxist feminism were focused on women's participation in the public space and the economic and political dimensions of equality, the everyday life of women in the private sphere was also a widely discussed issue. Kollontai, for example, argued for a sexual revolution, for the construction of new norms and attitudes regarding relationships between men and women, and for the thorough reform of the traditional concept of the family. Nevertheless, she viewed these steps as parts of a bigger process, aiming at the thorough restructuration of the society, in order to

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provide equal opportunities to women, supported by new social institutions in the fields of childcare, healthcare, education, culture and even housework (Sypnowich, 1993: 290).

The Soviet leadership considered these ideas vital for the development of the new Soviet society and tried to implement these principles in practice from the very beginnings of their rule. In Central Asia, however, the initiative to create an equal society for men and women appeared within the frames of the inherently colonial 'civilising mission'. In this way, Marxist feminism and colonialism were blended together in a unique and rather controversial 'feminist colonialist' modernising programme. Even if the 1930s saw the end of the most progressive approaches on women and the open attacks on 'backward' traditions and customs, the colonial-type Soviet restructuration of Central Asian societies began in the era which demanded female emancipation and empowerment (Egan, 2017: 36–41).

'Feminist colonialism' in practice in Central Asia

Although the Communist Manifesto promised to "transform the relations between the sexes into a purely private matter which concerns only the persons involved" (Communist Manifesto, 1848: 52), the Soviet leadership decided to intervene deeply into the relationships between men and women in Central Asia in order to be able to fulfil its aims and transform these traditional societies. From 1917 on, a series of decrees were issued in the spirit of Marxist feminism to strengthen the presence of revolutionary norms even in the most private domains of everyday life (Massell, 1974: 201). The most significant manifestation of this approach was the 1918 family code, introduced by Aleksandra Kollontai, at that time Commissar for Social Welfare. The new rules and regulations, among others, secularised marriage and eased divorce, legalised abortion, granted rights for children born out of wedlock, and forbade polygyny. In the meantime, women were also granted with several political and economic rights, including the right to vote and to be elected, and equal pay for equal work (Massell, 1974: 201).

In Central Asia, these changes were directly aimed at the eradication of traditional practices, which, in the eyes of the Soviet power, were obvious signs of the subordination and oppression of women (Edgar, 2006: 252). In order to guarantee the rigorous implementation of the new laws and regulations in Central Asia, traditional court structures based on customs and religion were eliminated and replaced by new, Soviet-style courts, which was a typical example of the interconnected nature of colonial and feminist aims. At the beginning of the 1920s, the state started the fight against religious

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and customary law concerning family matters to ensure the emancipation and empowerment of women, and spread the Soviet model of female behaviour (Massell, 1974: 192–200; Molyneaux, 1990: 25). Several campaigns were launched to support these aims, and the concept of 'crimes based on custom' was introduced to cover criminal acts "'rooted in a former way of life,' 'based on survivals of religion and tradition', and 'representing the relics of a tribal order'" (Massell, 1974: 202). By the end of the 1920s, a new criminal code guaranteed the new Soviet norms concerning women's place in families with the application of strict sanctions to deter the faithful followers of traditional values from falling out of the line with the new order.

The state maintained close supervision over the implementation of its modernising initiatives. The women's department (*zhenskii otdel*) of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, abbreviated as Zhenotdel, played a very significant part in the emancipation and empowerment of women in Central Asia. It propagated and supported their participation in the public sphere and in the economy, fostered their inclusion in education with a special emphasis of literacy, and led cultural and awareness campaigns – which were, however, at the same time also aimed at ideological indoctrination. The Zhenotdel also initiated the establishment of several local voluntary associations to further its agenda (Northrop, 2004: 78–79; Martin, 2018: 51–53; Roelofs, 2018: 166–167).

At the intersection of two value systems

In 1927, the Zhenotdel proudly declared the success of the emancipation of Central Asian women (Gökalp, 2014: 745), and the progress was directly observable in statistics (Lubin, 1981). However, the new laws and regulations were perceived by Central Asian people as a serious challenge to the traditional values of their societies. These values were strongly and intimately linked to the image of womanhood and women's appropriate behaviour, which constituted a significant bond in traditional Central Asian societies.

Traditional Central Asian women knew their place in the gendered social order well. They had their domain in the private sphere, at home, and they could enter the public sphere only in exceptional cases. Their everyday activities gathered around the traditional female roles of being a good daughter, a good wife, and a good mother. They were expected to act as the main transmitters of traditions within the family and the closer community, and they were supposed to be the protectors of family honour with their conservative, secluded way of life and modest, obedient behaviour. As an exchange, men

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provided them with the necessary goods, and carried the economic burdens for the maintenance of the family (Poliakov, 1992: 83–86).

Being aware of the importance of traditional gender roles in Central Asian societies, it is not surprising that the reception of the practices propagated by the Soviet Union was rather hostile. Social tensions were especially high in those cases when the new rules and regulations were aimed at the elimination of customs which were considered to be essential for preserving a family's honour (*namus*, an Arabic term recognised in local languages) and/or for complying the expectations of traditional authorities and communities (Northrop, 2004) – which means in any case concerning the 'women's question'. As the Soviet campaigns were intensified and the indoctrination attempts became inescapable, the irreconcilable differences between the traditional Central Asian and the new Soviet value systems became more and more unambiguous. The most common practical examples of this clash were the cases of polygyny, bride-price, veiling, child marriage, forced and arranged marriages, bride eloping and arbitrary divorce (Edgar, 2003; Edgar, 2006). In these cases, misunderstandings and even the complete lack of understanding from the side of the Soviet authorities could frequently lead to the opposite effect of what the leaders of the state meant to achieve.

In the case of polygyny, for example, husbands often exploited the double standards of Soviet and Islamic law, marrying their first wife according to state conventions, and taking the second or third on the basis of Islamic traditional customs (Northrop, 2004: 250–252; Edgar, 2006: 269). The bride-price was simply paid secretly, or under other labels (Edgar, 2003: 139–144). The question of the bride-price illustrates the lack of understanding between the two value systems from another aspect as well. The declared reason for its elimination was to erase the perceived objectification and unequal status of women. The implementation of the law, however, only further decreased the status of daughters within the family, and further contributed to the economic dependence of women (Edgar, 2003: 140–141).

The traditional societies of Soviet Central Asia insisted on their own norms and values, and tried to preserve them with every possible means, from the above-mentioned small legal shortcuts to brutal violence. As for the latter, it was not uncommon to mutilate, rape or even kill unveiled women, especially in the rural areas of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan during the 1920s and the 1930s. These women were often considered to bring shame to the names and *namus* of their families (Northrop, 2004: 95–96). According to the study of Marianne Kamp, only between 1927 and 1929, around 2 000 women were

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killed in Uzbekistan as a response to the so-called *hujum* ('attack'), the most intense unveiling campaign carried out by Soviet authorities (Kamp, 2006: 186). Violence against women who transgressed traditional gender norms was also present in those places where the veil was not common, as in Turkmenistan (Edgar, 2003).

After the modernisation campaigns of the 1920s–1930s, aimed at women and the traditional gender order, it became obvious that the insistence of the Soviet regime on changing traditional values led to the fact that following these values became a political statement and even a political tool, as an expression of hostility and resistance to Soviet colonial influence (Northrop 2004: 108). As a consequence, the importance of the traditional female model was enhanced and thoroughly politicised as a way of resistance against the Soviet power.

Conclusions

In this violent political (and several times physical) struggle between the traditional and the Soviet value systems, women were used as political objects, being (often forcefully) inscribed with the colliding values of the two antagonistic forces at the same time. As a consequence, they ended up as liminal beings stuck between the two models, obliged to follow traditional values in private, and Soviet ones in public. In this way, instead of real emancipation and empowerment, they had to carry a very specific double burden, torn between their states and their homes, between traditional and Soviet values.

On the other hand, as members of Central Asian societies, these women also had to face the challenges stemming from the colonial influence of the Soviet Union, aiming at the elimination of the traditional bonds and networks which formerly strengthened the cohesion and perseverance of Central Asian societies – in the process of which they were expected to play a significant role. Thus, at the end of the day, it was not emancipation and empowerment, but the needs of the Soviet state that defined the roles of women in the supposedly egalitarian Soviet society – which burdened women living in colonial-type environments even more, as in the case of Central Asian women.

Overall, the conclusion can be drawn that the colonial approach of the Soviet Union had contributed to the fact that its attempts aimed at the emancipation and empowerment of Central Asian women could only reach their declared objectives on the surface. In spite of using Marxist feminism as the foundational ideology behind the 'civilising mission' concerning women, the colonial-focused Soviet Union ironically established a structure where the intended civilisatory power with its practices and

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institutions itself became one of the main obstacles to emancipation and empowerment. Feminism and colonialism ousted each other in the early Soviet Central Asian case, making 'feminist colonialism' a cynical oxymoron, constructing a 'pseudo-egalitarian mythology' (Gabrielyan quoted in Aswin, 2002: 117), increasing the burdens of women, and leading to very similar consequences as the rule of traditional Western colonial powers did in other parts of the world.

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