



# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

---

Revising the History of Russian Colonialism

Author(s): Solomon M. Schwarz

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Apr., 1952), pp. 488-493

Published by: [Council on Foreign Relations](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20030915>

Accessed: 09/02/2013 17:55

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Council on Foreign Relations* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Foreign Affairs*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# REVISING THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN COLONIALISM

*By Solomon M. Schwarz*

**A**N offensive against historical science is in full swing in the Soviet Union, with the Communist Party scoring victory after victory in "the battle against objectivism and cosmopolitanism." One of the most important tasks recently imposed on Soviet historians is to rehabilitate the old Russian colonial policy. The fact that they have at the same time had to intensify their "unmasking" of the colonial policy of the Western nations has made their assignment all the more complicated.

In this connection so-called "East-researcher historians" are receiving particular attention. Their field of study is broader than that of the "Orientalist" in other countries, for it embraces not only the Near and Middle East, South-east Asia and the Far East, but also the "Soviet East," *i.e.* the Caucasus and Soviet Central Asia. In recent years, it has often been the subject of leading articles in the principal Soviet historical journal, *Voprosy Istorii*, published by the Historical Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. The April 1949 issue, for example, carried an article, "Urgent Tasks of Soviet East-researcher Historians," which asserted:

It is necessary to explode completely the myth, which right-wing Socialists are at present particularly active in propagating, that conditions have been and are being created within the framework of the British or French or American colonial system for the gradual transition to independent national development of the backward peoples which are to be "civilized." It must be shown that British rule brought India not culture and civilization, but poverty, hunger and a crushing death-rate. The fact that tendencies toward idealizing British rule in India can be found even in certain works of progressive historians, who by no means belong to the imperialist camp, makes this all the more essential. Thus, for example, not even the valuable work of Palme Dutt, *India Today*, is free of occasional errors of this type.

Matters have taken a drastic turn indeed when even Palme Dutt, one of the most orthodox British Communists and himself an Indian by birth, cannot meet the demands of the new line.

Another part of the task of Soviet East-researchers is made plain in a later issue:

As they expose the predatory colonial policy of the imperialists and their flunkies, the bourgeois Orientalists and all sorts of pseudo-scholars who try to whitewash and embellish that policy and deceive gullible people . . . Soviet East-researchers must propagandize in their works the great achievements in the model republics of the Soviet East.<sup>1</sup>

All this, however, is a secondary goal of the Soviet East-researcher historians. The chief one prescribed for them in recent years has been to expound a positive view of the process of Russian colonial expansion under the Tsars, the period when what is today the "Soviet East" was integrated into the great Russian Empire. The history of the peoples of the present-day Sov-

<sup>1</sup> *Voprosy Istorii*, December 1950.

iet East must henceforth be depicted as "the history of their friendship with the great Russian people."<sup>2</sup>

Thus, in the last 15 years the Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. has made a full 180-degree turn in its appraisal of Russian colonial policy. During the first two decades of Communist rule, Russian penetration into the Caucasus and Turkestan was represented in Communist literature as a search for colonial plunder. As late as August 1934, when Stalin, Zhdanov and Kirov published "Remarks on the Outline Textbook of the History of the U.S.S.R.," which became a turning-point in the teaching of history in the Soviet Union, they clung to the old anti-colonial position in evaluating Russian colonial history. They criticized the "Outline Textbook" explicitly because "the annexationist-colonialist rôle of Russian Tsarism . . . is not emphasized."<sup>3</sup>

This past sin of Stalin, Zhdanov and Kirov can no longer be mentioned in the Soviet Union. In the latest Soviet historiography, their report is no longer regarded as the basic document which first "correctly oriented" historians in the evaluation of Russian colonial policy. This honor is now reserved for a document entitled the "Decision of the Committee of Experts of the Government Board for the Competition for the Best Textbook in the History of the U.S.S.R.," published three years later. There we read:

The fact that, let us say, Georgia came under a Russian protectorate at the end of the eighteenth century, as well as the fact that the Ukraine passed under Russian rule, is regarded by the authors [of the textbooks submitted in the competition] as an absolute evil, without taking into consideration the concrete historical conditions of that time. The authors do not perceive that Georgia was at that time faced with the alternative either of being conquered by the Persian Shah and the Turkish Sultan or coming under the protectorate of Russia. . . . They do not perceive that the latter prospect was the lesser evil.

The theory of "the lesser evil" was at once universally adopted in Soviet literature. In recent years, however, even this no longer suffices, and the official historians go far beyond it. For example, in an article by Professor M. V. Nechkina, published in the form of a "letter to the editor" of *Voprosy Istorii*, April 1951, the author does not presume to question the correctness of the formulation in the "Decision of the Committee of Experts" but attempts to give it a new interpretation corresponding to the latest official demands. "A lesser evil is an evil nonetheless, that is, a negative concept; but, taken as a whole, the quotation [from the "Decision"] does not speak of an evil, of a negative factor as such, but indeed of a positive factor." The words "lesser evil" should not be torn out of the context. The "basic thought" of the "Decision" had the effect of "establishing the positive factor." One should not forget, of course, that there was also national oppression and that "this oppression was a genuine evil for the people." The author continues: "But does the concept of national-colonial oppression cover the essence of all the facts which constituted the life of the people *after* its annexation to Russia, *after* its incorporation into the latter's structure? Of course not." And she adds: "The Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaidjan, after their annexation to Russia,

<sup>2</sup> *Voprosy Istorii*, April 1951.

<sup>3</sup> *K Izucheniyu Istorii: Sbornik* ("Toward the Study of History: a Symposium"). Moscow: Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1937, p. 22.

were incorporated into the economic life of Russia, which was on a higher level than their own. They, in turn, made a vast contribution to the economic life of the country, to its forward movement. Economic intercourse among the various peoples was not exhausted by the national-colonial relationship even though it proceeded under its yoke." The importance "of the cultural intercourse of the peoples through their best, most advanced representatives" was just as great. Hence the conclusion (with a logically rather unexpected emphasis on the rôle of the "older brother"):

In appraising the results of the peoples' incorporation into the structure of Tsarist Russia, historians must pay special attention to the intercourse among the peoples, to the new and positive content that the great Russian people, in spite of Tsarism, introduced into their economic and cultural life. The task of historians is to depict the historical perspective of the unity and struggle of the toilers of various peoples under the leadership of their older brother, the Russian people.

A great deal is left unexpressed in this exposition, and the article will probably be criticized by more consistent champions of the new line. Nevertheless, the basic ideas of the new orientation are all there.

Of course, we would be wrong to paint Russian colonial expansion in unrelieved black. All the positive factors mentioned in the above quotations actually existed. But there were also contrary factors in the form of brutal national oppression and harsh colonial exploitation, and among independent-minded writers there has never been any question that the negative factors were predominant. Formerly the Communists went furthest of all in their condemnations, ignoring everything positive in Russian colonial development just as today they deny the existence of positive elements in the history of British rule in India or American rule in the Philippines. But now they bend every effort to make their readers forget everything in the history of Russian colonial policy that gave rise to the popular—though oversimplified—phrase, "Russia—the prison of nations." Before long the colonial policy of Tsarist Russia may become, in these writings, a "liberation" policy, linked with the Soviet Union's "liberation" policy after World War II.

It is impossible, in a brief space, to trace the manner in which this reorientation influences the entire treatment of the history of the non-Russian peoples of the Soviet Union. Two examples of the revised treatment may, however, be noted—the new interpretation of the revolt of the Kazakhs under the leadership of Kenesary Kasymov from 1837 to 1846, and of the struggle for the independence of the North Caucasus carried on from 1834 to 1859 by Shamil.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Kazakh steppes were not yet actually part of the Russian Empire. The vast territory inhabited by the Kazakhs (or, as they were generally called at that time, the Kirghiz), extending from the southern Urals in the west to the Chinese border in the east, then comprised three quasi-statelike units—the Small, Middle and Great Hordes. The first two had accepted a Russian protectorate as early as the eighteenth century, but actually remained semi-independent, while the more distant Great Horde retained complete independence. The Kazakhs were already painfully aware of Russian pressure, especially when Russian colonization assumed a state-organized pattern. The aims of the colonization were

primarily military; the best lands were taken from the nomadic Kazakhs so that Russian colonists (Cossacks) could be settled on them. This policy, conducted for the most part with complete disregard for Kazakh interests and rights, led from time to time to uprisings, of which Kenesary's was the most important.

This revolt was recently the subject of a major historical work, "Kazakhstan in the Period from the 1820's to the 1840's," published in Alma-Ata in 1947 by E. Bekmakhanov, a Kazakh. He portrayed Kenesary as a fighter for national liberation and national unity and, at the same time, as an outstanding and progressive statesman. The Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. accorded the author the title of Doctor of Historical Science for this work. At a conference in the Academy's Institute of History, he was supported in his presentation and his conclusions by the leading Russian historians, particularly the East-researchers. He was also enthusiastically backed by the Party and academic leading lights in Kazakhstan. Thus when the Institute for History, Anthropology and Ethnography of the Kazakh Academy of Sciences assembled for its first plenary session in 1948, Bekmakhanov won general acclaim; and the President, Professor S. Yushkov, compared Kenesary with Shamil, at that time an undisputed hero. It is true that when an account of the session was published in *Voprosy Istorii* in March 1949, the writer (A. Yakunin) criticized Yushkov's report and particularly objected to the analogy between Kenesary and Shamil, since in Kenesary's activity—in contrast to Shamil's—social motives had allegedly played no part. But even this commentator found it "beyond question that the war of the Kazakh people under Kenesary's leadership against the expansionist policy of Tsarism was an anti-colonial war, a war for national liberation."

This evaluation of Kenesary, which was still essentially favorable, even if moderate in comparison with Bekmakhanov's, received more detailed support in a critical discussion of the Bekmakhanov book by K. Sharipov,<sup>4</sup> in the second edition of the university textbook "History of the U.S.S.R.," and in the "History of the Kazakh S.S.R. from Earliest Times to Our Day," by Omarov and Pankratova, both published in 1949. We read in the latter work:

Kenesary's revolt, which was anti-colonial in character, played a progressive rôle in the history of the people. It was progressive because of the political demands advanced by Kenesary, whose ambition was to unite the Kazakhs in a single state and to overcome their inter-tribal enmity and feudal dismemberment.

The time was at hand, however, for a complete official about-face. Even Kenesary's efforts to overcome "feudal dismemberment" were soon declared to have been "usurpation." An article in *Voprosy Istorii*, June 1949, on the "History of the Kazakh S.S.R." asserted: "Kenesary's policy directed at the creation of a centralized state was an expression of his usurpationist efforts to subordinate all other holders of power to himself." It was only a step from this to Kenesary's complete condemnation. On December 26, 1950, *Pravda* published an annihilating article on the errors committed by the historians who had dealt with the history of Kazakhstan. Nothing was left of Bekmakhanov's entire conception:

Instead of revealing the profoundly progressive significance of Kazakhstan's an-

<sup>4</sup> *Voprosy Istorii*, April 1949, p. 109-14.

nexation to Russia, Bekmakhanov sees in it nothing but colonial oppression. . . . The emergence of the Kasymovs [Kenesary and his brother], which stood in the way of annexation, was contrary to the aspirations of the progressive section of the Kazakh people. . . . This was a reactionary movement, which dragged the Kazakh people backward. . . .

Thus, Kenesary's principal guilt had lain in his resistance to annexation to Russia. After all this it was a simple matter to render a final judgment:

Khan Kenesary was a typical feudal bandit. . . . Kenesary's revolt, which was not supported by the Kazakh people, was a reactionary, feudal-nationalist movement, aided by forces abroad which were hostile to Russia.<sup>5</sup>

To complete the proceeding, Kenesary's Communist historian, only yesterday the object of general acclaim, was suddenly degraded to the rank of an "unmasked bourgeois nationalist."<sup>6</sup>

After Kenesary, it was bound to be Shamil's turn. This was a more difficult matter, however. Until recently, even educated Russians had known little or nothing about Kenesary; but almost every schoolboy knew about Shamil, leader of the North Caucasian mountaineers in their fight for independence. Thus the "Great Soviet Encyclopedia" said:

Shamil was the leader of the national liberation movement of the Caucasian mountain peoples, which was directed against the colonial policy of Tsarist Russia. . . . The popular revolt, directed against Russia and against the local propertied classes, was basically anti-feudal. The rebels' social demands were hidden under a religious mantle.

Somewhere in the depths of the Communist Party apparatus, however, the idea had begun to mature that the "legend" of Shamil and the religious-national movement of the "murids" which he led must be done away with. In 1947 a conference was called at the Historical Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the U.S.S.R. to discuss the question of "the historical essence of Caucasian muridism." The rapporteur, K. G. Adzhemian, launched a sharp attack on the prevailing view. Shamil's movement had not been a struggle for national freedom but a struggle "for freedom for wolves, for freedom for backwardness, oppression, darkness, Asiaticism." Adzhemian also reproached Shamil with having strengthened the anti-Russian coalition at the time of the Crimean War, thus hastening the "fall of heroic Sevastopol," and with having shown hospitality to the "Polish and Hungarian rabble" that offered him aid.

Many participants in the debate opposed Adzhemian, condemning him for defending "the old colonialist thesis" and "in essence, reviving the views of the Tsarist generals." The chairman, Professor N. M. Druzhinin, reminded him that it was Polish and Hungarian revolutionaries (after 1848) whom he had characterized as "rabble."

For three years thereafter no one dared attack Shamil openly. In March 1950, Geidar Guseinov was awarded the Stalin Prize for an historical work, "From the History of Social and Feudal Thought in Nineteenth-Century Azerbaidjan," in which Shamil was portrayed very sympathetically. Shamil, wrote Guseinov, "attempted in every way to aid the struggle of the Azerbaid-

<sup>5</sup> "Several Questions of Central Asian History," *Voprosy Istorii*, April 1951.

<sup>6</sup> *Pravda*, October 20, 1951.

jan peasants . . . against Tsarist national oppression and against the Azerbaidjanian feudal lords." But in May 1950 the decision honoring Guseinov was rescinded—an unprecedented act in the history of the Stalin Prize. The Prize Committee administered a sharp rebuke to itself by declaring that the appraisal of Shamil and of "muridism" in Guseinov's work "basically distorts the meaning of the movement, which was reactionary and nationalistic, and was in the service of British capitalism and the Turkish Sultan."

After that, no one any longer dared stand up for the attitude toward Shamil which a short while before had been universally held. Without risk of opposition, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Azerbaidjan, M. D. Bagirov, could now write (*Bolshevik*, July 1950) that "the longing of progressive people in the Caucasus for union with Russia reflected the feelings of the broad masses." And he now could also settle accounts with all those—many of whom he cited by name—who "distorted the historical truth, glorifying muridism and its leader, Shamil, which were inspired by Russia's rivals, Turkey and England." And A. Daniyalov in *Voprosy Istorii*, September 1950, asserted flatly that "objectively, Russia filled the rôle of liberator of the Caucasian peoples from the cruel and arbitrary oppression of the Iranian and Turkish bandits" and that "Shamil was forced to overcome the stubborn resistance of the people, which expressed its sympathy for Russia, the savior of Dagestan from the eastern brutes."<sup>8</sup>

The circle is complete. The "old colonialist thesis," in a somewhat modernized "liberation" version, today enjoys unqualified recognition in the Soviet Union.

<sup>7</sup> *Pravda*, May 14, 1950.

<sup>8</sup> A. Daniyalov, "Distortions in the Examination of Muridism and the Shamil Movement," *Voprosy Istorii*, September 1950.