

### Russian Revolutionaries Reach Out to the Islamic Community

Despite the generally anti-religious attitudes expressed by Marxism, Russian socialism found an ally in the Muslim community during the 1917 political upheaval. Muslims had been systematically oppressed, excluded, and discriminated against by the Russian tsars for hundreds of years; thus, it is no surprise that many were eager to embrace a new regime. In the early months of 1917, various Muslim groups and organizations encouraged their constituents to lend their support to the workers' revolutionary movements occurring across Russia. Although most Muslims living within Russian territory were clustered in Central Asia and the Caucasus Mountains, far from the strikes and protests happening in the industrialized cities of western Russia, such as Petrograd and Moscow, the Russian socialist movements looked to the Islamic community for support in overthrowing the tsarist regime in 1917.

On April 26, 1917, the Central Bureau of Russian Muslims published an appeal to the Muslim women of Russia in the newspaper, *Turke-stanskii golos* (*The Voice of Turkestan*)<sup>1</sup>. *Turke-stanskii golos* asks, "How could we waste millions of Muslim women's votes for good Muslim work in Russia?"<sup>2</sup> Muslim women were urged to join other Russian women in newfound political action, by organizing, forming committees, and voting. The socialists, in an effort to draw female attentions away from feminism and instead to socialism, recruited women, promising them suffrage and liberation. Indeed, it was women who helped set off the chain of events that became the February Revolution of 1917—although Trotsky and others asserted that

---

<sup>1</sup> "Appeal to Muslim women by the Central Bureau of Russian Muslims," in Michael C. Hickey, ed. *Competing Voices from the Russian Revolution* (Greenwood Press, Santa Barbara, CA, 2011), 170. Ebook edition.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

“no major demonstrations had been planned by any socialist organizations for the women’s holiday [International Women’s Day, February 23, 1917]”<sup>3</sup>, female workers who had taken to the streets to celebrate International Women’s Day sparked a series of protests and demonstrations, shouting to their male compatriots to lay down their work and join them in protest.<sup>4</sup> Many Russian women in cities and industrialized areas received leaflets and pamphlets from socialist organizations—leaflets advising them to ““hold fast in solidarity with [their] remaining male comrades and join with them in common struggle with the government and factory owners””.<sup>5</sup> The Central Bureau of Russian Muslims similarly encouraged Muslim women to join the struggle, but in enthusiastic words more reminiscent of hymns—“The exalted vision of today's new life must fill Muslim women's eyes!... Muslim women must actively enter into the thick of life. They must finally raise their voices as part of the general choir!”<sup>6</sup> In this way, Muslim women were called upon to join the revolutionary cause without forsaking their religion.

The Russian socialists did not only reach out to Muslim women for support. Although many socialist intellectual luminaries were in fact atheists, many Russian socialist leaders did not think it prudent to exclude the religious. Lenin himself believed that abandonment of religious beliefs should not be a prerequisite for membership in a socialist party. In 1909, he wrote on recruiting theist workers, stating that, “We are absolutely opposed to giving the slightest offence to their religious convictions”.<sup>7</sup> This religious tolerance was extended not only to Christians, but also to Muslims, who had suffered great repression by Imperialist Russia. In return, many Muslims supported socialist aims. The First All-Russian Congress of Muslims was held from

---

<sup>3</sup> Ruthchild, Rochelle. “War, Revolution, Victory?” in *Equality and Revolution: Women’s Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917* (University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA, 2010), 220.

<sup>4</sup> Ruthchild, “War, Revolution, Victory?”, 220.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

<sup>6</sup> “Appeal to Muslim women”, Hickey, *Competing Voices*, 170.

<sup>7</sup> Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. “Attitude of Worker’s party toward religion”, 1909, in Andrew Rothstein, Bernard Isaacs trans., *Lenin Collected Works* (Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973, Vol. 15), 402-413. Accessed March 5, 2012, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1909/may/13.htm>.

May 1 to May 11, 1917 in Moscow, and at this conference, one thousand Muslim delegates (two hundred of which were women) voted in favor of many socialist policies, such as eight-hour working days, redistribution of property, and equal rights for women.<sup>8</sup> This congress also supported the idea of cultural and religious autonomy within a new Russian republic, writing that “The form of state construction in Russia best suited to the Muslim nationalities' interests is a democratic republic, organized on a national-territorial-federative basis....a central general Muslim institution with legislative powers must be founded for all of Russia”.<sup>9</sup> Many Muslims believed that Islamic values had much in common with the socialism espoused by the Bolsheviks and other parties, and several slogans connecting the two were generated. One such slogan reads, “Long live soviet power, and long live the sharia [Islamic law]”.<sup>10</sup> The socialists continued to support the idea of religious freedom. On November 24, 1917, the new Soviet government, led by the Bolsheviks, reached out to Muslims in a declaration entitled “To all the Muslim workers of Russia and the East”. This declaration assured Muslims that, “your beliefs and practices, your national and cultural institutions are forever free and inviolate. Know that your rights, like those of all the peoples of Russia, are under the mighty protection of the revolution”.<sup>11</sup> Although Islam would suffer in later years from the state-enforced policy, the Bolshevik government did allow religious freedom to the Muslim community for at least the first years of the new regime.

Although many Muslims and Muslim organizations supported the Bolsheviks throughout the events of 1917, the results of the election to the Russian Constituent Assembly in late 1917 indicate that Islamic nationalism, or at least Islamic autonomy, was still a prime focus of many

---

<sup>8</sup> Crouch, Dave. “The Bolsheviks and Islam,” *International Socialism* 110 (April 2006). Accessed March 5, 2012, <http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=181>.

<sup>9</sup> “A Resolution by the First All-Russian Muslim Conference,” in Hickey, *Competing Voices*, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Crouch, “Bolsheviks and Islam”.

<sup>11</sup> “To All Muslim Workers of Russia and the East,” in Crouch, “The Bolsheviks and Islam”.

Muslims. The Muslim nationalist and liberal parties received over one million votes in the election.<sup>12</sup> In the heavily Islamic Kazan province of Central Asia, Muslim parties received over 250,000 votes (more than one quarter of all votes cast), while the Bolsheviks only received 50,000 votes.<sup>13</sup> The Islamic community in Russia may have supported the overthrow of the tsarist regime, but the critical issue for Russian Muslims was Islamic self-determination.

In 1917, Russian socialist movements reached out to Muslims to join the revolutionary cause without forcing them to abandon their faith. Many Muslims responded in kind, eagerly encouraging men and women to take up the socialist cause and fight for a new Russia. However, statements by the First All-Russian Congress of Muslims and results from the 1917 Constituent Assembly elections indicate that Russian Muslims were first and foremost dedicated to promoting Islamic self-determination in the new Russian socialist state.

---

<sup>12</sup> Radkey, Oliver. *The Election to the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1950), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Radkey, *Election*, 27.

## Works Cited

- Crouch, Dave. "The Bolsheviks and Islam," *International Socialism* 110, April 2006. Accessed March 5, 2012, <<http://www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?id=181>>.
- Hickey, Michael C. *Competing Voices from the Russian Revolution*. Greenwood Press, Santa Barbara, CA, 2011. Ebook edition.
- Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich. "Attitude of Worker's party toward religion", 1909, in Andrew Rothstein, Bernard Isaacs trans., *Lenin Collected Works*. Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1973, Vol. 15, 402-413. Accessed March 5, 2012, <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1909/may/13.htm>>.
- Radkey, Oliver. *The Election to the Russian Constituent Assembly of 1917*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1950.
- Ruthchild, Rochelle. "War, Revolution, Victory?" in *Equality and Revolution: Women's Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917*. University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA, 2010.