



The Basmachi: Factors Behind the Rise and Fall of an Islamic Insurgency in Central Asia

by Boris Kogan

Abstract. This paper delivers a short overview of the Basmachi insurgency in Soviet Central Asia, a conflict which spanned a quarter of a century (1918-approximately 1943) and the territory of a half-dozen of today's countries, foreshadowing many future Islamic insurgencies including those in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Western China, Iraq and Chechnya. The "Basmachestvo" involved prolonged full-spectrum warfare fought by a fragmented insurgency with multiple centers of gravity against a multiethnic empire, whose ideology the insurgents perceived as a threat to their identity and way of life. The subject has been largely opaque to Western historians due to several reasons, including the remote and inaccessible theater of warfare (Soviet Central Asia having been denied to Western journalists and diplomats in the timeframe discussed,) the suppression of accounts failing to adhere to the official narrative by the Soviet Union and purges of those who participated on both sides of the insurgency and remained in the Soviet Union after the conflict's conclusion. Thus, a conflict with a high degree of relevance to the present-day international situation has been forgotten or ignored. This paper attempts to begin to remedy this situation.



Figure One. Soviet Central Asia. Imagery retrieved from GoogleMaps.

From 1918 until the mid-1940's the consolidation of Soviet power in Central Asia was opposed by a widespread insurgency. Known in Soviet media as the "Basmachestvo" or

“Basmachi” (“oppressors” in Uzbek) and to itself by many terms including “Qorboshilar” (“leaders”-Uz.), this insurgency was many-faceted in nature. Insofar as it had a unified cause, this was opposition to the administration of Central Asia (formerly Russian Turkestan) by the militantly atheist Soviet Union and its representatives among the Russian and Russified city populations. Of the failed counter-revolutionary movements that flared up throughout the Soviet Union after its establishment, the Basmachi lasted the longest, encompassed the widest swath of territory and perhaps had the highest chance of success. Had they succeeded, it is possible that independent countries would have arisen in modern-day Central Asia, much as they did in the Baltic and Poland. In this paper, I propose to give a general overview of the Basmachi movement’s rise, fall and aftermath, and examine the reasons behind its ultimate failure to achieve independence.

The insurgency initially had two major sub-components: the Jadidists or Jadids, a reformist Islamic movement, and the Qadimists, who were the traditional Islamist movement representing the ulema (Islamic clergy) and the Emir of Bukhara (Paksoy). The former referred to themselves initially as Shuro-i-Islam, the latter as Ulema Jamiati (Olcott). Zeki Velidi Togan, a Bashkort leader who threw his lot in with the Jadids after having fought for the Communists in Russia, refers to the two parties as “socialist” and “radical-nationalist,” respectively, but notes a further distinction between socialist and non-socialist Jadidists (Paksoy). Later, a third party would emerge: the Pan-Turkist/Pan-Islamist Turkish pashas Cemal and Enver.

The roots of armed insurrection ran deep in Turkestan. There had been a proto-Qadimist revolt in the Ferghana Valley against the Russians in 1898 due to the circumscription of the powers of the waqf (Islamic endowments) and ulema. More recently, there had been a Turkestan-wide rebellion (also started in Ferghana) in 1916 caused by the Russian administration’s announcement that the Turkestanian indigenous population would be subject to conscription into labor units (Olcott). These insurgencies failed for two reasons: the united front presented by the Russian military administration and settlers and the lack of support from the indigenous leadership such as the Emir of Bukhara, who stayed loyal to his Russian patrons. Both were suppressed, the latter quite severely, but they had provided a precedent for the coming insurgency.

When the Russian empire collapsed in 1917, the initial reaction in Turkestan was the emergence of a widespread revolutionary movement. This included the Jadidists, who demanded equality and modernization within a Russian federation of states, and the Qadimists, who desired a sharia state and the primacy of the ulema as well as traditional power structures. The Jadidists at first allied themselves with the Russian Bolsheviks of the main cities, who were centered around the Tashkent Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. Almost immediately, conflict broke out.

The first active insurgency emerged in Kokand as a reaction to Communist nationalization, and was led by a Qadimist named Irgash. As it became obvious that the Communists did not mean to keep the initial promises of self-determination that they had made to the various Muslim nationalities of the former Russian empire, the Jadidists turned on them as well. The Russian population, too, was split; there was a White Russian anti-Communist underground in Tashkent, which had allied itself with the Jadidists and counted on British support from across the Caspian (modern-day Azerbaijan). All parties in Turkestan were alienated by the Bolsheviks’ economic policies, which led to widespread privation (Nazaroff); the indigenous population of Turkestan was outraged by the social reforms forced upon them

(Olcott). In Fergana, the Jadidists, led by Madamin Bek, were joined by General Monstrov's Russian Peasant Army, and captured all of the major cities of the valley, including Osh, Jalalabad and Andijon. By 1919, the entire country, with the exception of Tashkent, was controlled by either Jadidist or Qadimist insurgents, who had formed a loose alliance (Olcott).

This was the high point of the insurgency in Turkestan. Even here the signs of the future disaster could be discerned. The aims of the various parties were incompatible: the centerpiece of the Qadimists, the Emir of Bukhara, "regarded the Soviets as the Russians...and attempted to remain loyal," and regarded the Jadidists as a greater threat than the Bolsheviks, at least according to Togan. The Jadidists desired the elimination of the Emir of Bukhara, and the establishment of a Turkestani republic; the socialists among them desired the nationalization of most of the economy (Paksoy). The White Underground desired a return to a Russian-dominated empire or federation (Nazaroff). Though the primary insurgent commanders (Irgash and Madamin Bek) attempted to form a unified command structure, it was never stable (Olcott); furthermore, it is unclear to what degree they controlled their sub-commanders' actions. The insurgency was able to maintain control of Turkestan during this timeframe because the Bolsheviks' main forces were isolated from Turkestan by the White Armies fighting them in Siberia (Olcott). The Basmachi failed to take advantage of this temporary respite to secure material support from any major nation besides Afghanistan (Nazaroff).

With the defeat of the abovementioned White Armies in 1919-1920, the Bolsheviks were able to concentrate on Central Asia. Their forces inexorably wrested the cities from the insurgents; the latter could not stand against the Red Army in a conventional battle. By the end of 1921, the major cities and lines of communication were all controlled by the Bolsheviks (Olcott). The Emir of Bukhara had been dislodged from his seat of power and forced to flee to Afghanistan. This defeat ended the first phase of the insurgency.



Figure Two. Madamin Bek and his insurgents defected from the Basmachi and joined the Red Army in 1920. Here, he conducts a joint inspection of his troops with the commander of the Red Army's Eastern Front, Mikhail Frunze. (Unknown)

During the second phase, the nature of the insurgency changed. First, it was forced to abandon its attempts to seize and hold territory and fight the Bolsheviks on conventional terms.

From this point on, it primarily fought by raids launched from sanctuaries in the mountains and deserts, and later from across the Afghan border. Second, the Turkish Pashas entered the scene with their own organizations including armed forces as well as propagandists, and brought their agenda into play. Third, the Jadidists were marginalized and ceased to play a major part in the insurgency. Fourth, the Bolsheviks implemented a new counterinsurgency strategy. As a result, the insurgency became centered on Qadimist groups built around the Emir of Bukhara, and dependent entirely on Afghan support.



Figure Three. The Emir of Bukhara, Said Mohammed Alim Khan. This picture was presumably taken between 1920, when the Emir was dispossessed from Bukhara, and 1923, when he was forced from the territory of modern-day Tajikistan and fled to Afghanistan. (Unknown)

The abovementioned Pashas had been exiled from Turkey by its new leader, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. They moved East into the former Russian Empire to implement their plan for the establishment of a pan-Islamic empire stretching from British India to Turkey. Naturally, the entrance of the Pashas on the scene diminished the already small possibility of British support for the insurgency. Cemal Pasha moved to Kabul and pursued a policy aimed at establishing the center of an Islamic state in the Punjab; Enver Pasha moved to Eastern Bukhara, threw in his lot with the deposed Emir, and attempted to rally the insurgency around himself. According to Togan, Enver Pasha thus frustrated the master plans of the Jadidists, who had been preparing to

launch a Turkestan-wide offensive aimed at re-establishing territorial control. Due to his lack of understanding of the realities on the ground, he alienated the Jadidists and their supporters in the urban underground, and caused the premature and uncoordinated launch of several components of the planned offensive in 1921-1922; these were all crushed by the Bolsheviks. This all precipitated the Jadidists' fading from the scene, culminating in the flight of Togan to Iran and Turkey in the beginning of 1923 (Paksoy).

The new counterinsurgency policy of the Bolsheviks was twofold. On the one hand, they temporarily reversed those of their economic and social policies which had alienated so much of the population in 1918. They returned confiscated lands to the waqfs, allowed the reinstatement of the traditional schools (maqtab) and allowed sharia courts power. They also allowed a resurgence of free trade in accordance with their New Economic Policy, improving the populace's living conditions. All this separated the Basmachi from their population base, which had now lost many of its original reasons for supporting the insurgency.

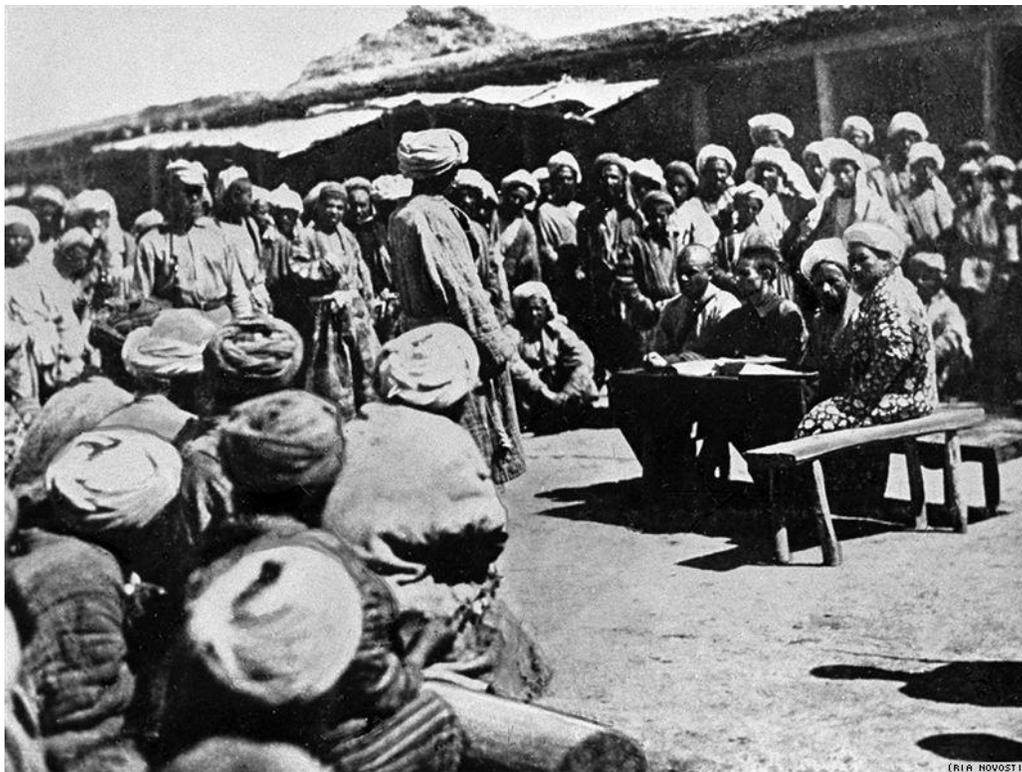


Figure Four. Captured Basmachi on trial, 1 August 1925. (Unknown)



Figure Five. Captured Basmachi lined up for execution. (Unknown)

At the same time, the Bolsheviks altered their military tactics. They began to incorporate large amounts of indigenous troops into their forces, while relying on a backbone of conventional units staffed by Russian veterans and heavily supported by aerial power (Olcott). This was supplemented by ChON (Chasti Osobogo Naznacheniya)-special purpose units, made up heavily of indigenous personnel, who impersonated insurgent forces in order to fragment the insurgency, launch false flag operations and intercept foreign material assistance. It was one of these units which was responsible for the death of Enver Pasha in 1922 in Eastern Bukhara (Leitner).

At this point, the insurgency had effectively lost any chances it had had of liberating Turkestan, barring force majeure involving the systemic collapse of Soviet power. By the end of 1923, the majority of its forces had either reconciled with the Bolsheviks, went underground or into safe havens in Western or Afghan Turkestan, where they coalesced around the Emir of Bukhara by default. From there, the insurgents would launch raids of varying scope and duration into Soviet Turkestan at opportune moments, i.e., when the local population would arise against the inexorable rolling back of the concessions made in the beginning of the 1920s. However, these raids could only last as long as it took the Soviet Union to mobilize and move large conventional units against the insurgents, at which point they would be forced back across the border.

The two major leaders of this third stage of the insurgency were Dzhunnaid Khan and Ibrahim Bek. Dzhunnaid Khan was a Turkmen who was originally based in Khiva and Khorezm. With the consolidation of Bolshevik power in Turkestan, he was forced to move his base of operations first to modern-day western Turkmenistan and the Karakum desert in 1924 and then to Iran in 1927. He launched a final raid across the border in 1931 in an attempt to take advantage of the unrest and discontent caused by Soviet collectivization, but was unable to stand against the Soviet counteroffensive, and was ultimately defeated in 1933 (Olcott).



Figure Six. Ibrahim Bek (Unknown)

Ibrahim Bek was a leader of the Uzbek Lokay tribe who continued to fight against the Bolsheviks in Southern Tadjikistan after the defeat of the insurgency elsewhere. He enjoyed the support of the Emir of Bukhara and the Afghan government, as well as the fact that the remains of the insurgency from all parts of Turkestan rallied around him. He also had the distinction of fielding the most organized and disciplined force in Basmachi history. However, once the Soviet Union had disposed of the other insurgents in Turkestan, it concentrated overwhelming force against Ibrahim Bek; the Soviet Army Corps that was sent into Southern Tadjikistan in 1925 was joined by numerous former insurgents who had been alienated by Ibrahim Bek's appropriations. Defeated, Ibrahim Bek retreated across the border into Northern Afghanistan. There, he was forced to lay low for the time being by a treaty signed with the Soviets by the Afghan King, Amanullah (Tikhonov).

In 1928, Amanullah was overthrown by a Tadjik, Bachai Sakao, who gave the insurgency free reign against the Soviet Union. In 1929, Ibrahim Bek was appointed by the Emir to lead an invasion into Tadjikistan to liberate it from the Bolsheviks. He oversaw a series of cross-border raids, capturing Gharm and raiding into the Ferghana Valley. The Soviets countered with a counteroffensive, combined with repressive measures against the indigenous population including the deportation of a quarter million inhabitants of Ferghana and the destruction of cities including Namangan, Andijon, Marghilan and Dushanbe (Ritter). They also launched a counterattack into Afghanistan with a force wearing Afghan Army uniforms, which captured Mazar-I-Sharif in the spring of 1929, but soon withdrew (Tikhonov). Throughout 1930, raids in both directions continued. At this point, the Afghan government, now lead by Nadir Shah, launched a campaign against the Basmachi in Afghan Turkestan, with limited success. In April 1931, pressed on both sides, Ibrahim Bek launched a final offensive into Tadjikistan, where he was defeated and captured in June (Ritter).



Figure Seven. Soviet National Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) counterinsurgents operating against the Basmachi in Tajikistan's Kulyab district in 1932. (Gordeeva)

The defeat of Dzhunnaid Khan and Ibrahim Bek marked the end of major Basmachi operations against the Soviet Union, though it was far from obvious at the time. Hundreds of thousands of refugees from Soviet Central Asia remained in Afghanistan; according to assessments made in the late 1930's by the Soviet embassy in Kabul, among them were thousands of fighters who had maintained their weapons and organizations (Tikhonov). The Emir of Bukhara, too, was still in Afghanistan, and still dreamt of regaining his throne. Minor cross-border raids continued. The Japanese and German intelligence services continually sought an opportunity to re-launch the insurgency en masse and thus weaken the Soviet Union well into the 1940's. Another massive cross-border invasion was planned for the summer of 1943, its object being the reinstatement of the Emir in Bukhara.

It was not to be. Soviet intelligence penetration of the Basmachi organizations of Afghanistan was very thorough. Simultaneously, throughout the 1930's and 1940's the British had increased their influence over Afghanistan's foreign policy. The final nail in the coffin of the insurgency was a series of purges undertaken by the Afghan police against the Central Asian diaspora in 1943, probably at the behest of these two foreign powers, which culminated in the aged Emir being called before the King of Afghanistan, Zahir Shah, and being ordered to cease and desist in no uncertain terms (Tikhonov). With the Emir's death the following year, the insurgency lost its last key figure; the defeat of Germany and Japan removed any hope that the Soviet Union would collapse. Thus, the Basmachi movement effectively came to an end.

In conclusion: any chances the Basmachi had had at setting up an independent Turkestan disappeared the moment when the Jadidist aspect of the insurgency collapsed in 1921. From that point on, the insurgency was doomed. As valiantly as it might have fought, its leadership lacked the vision, foreign support and administrative abilities to set up a stable state. We see this

pattern repeated in later Islamic insurgencies across Eurasia. From the Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan established in Kashgar in the 1930's, through the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan of the 1990's and to the Islamic State of Iraq of the 2000's, these movements all followed the pattern originally set by the Basmachi. They were able to leverage popular dissatisfaction, a movement with a core of dedicated fighters and an Islamic ideology whose basic tenets were shared by the population in order to conduct an initially successful disruptive insurgency. During this process, the most radical and charismatic leaders of the movement would come to the forefront.

Once the movement gained control of a territory and established governance, they would be faced with the problems of administration and control. Here, they would be undermined by the results of their earlier successes. Those very members of the insurgency who had had the education, vision and inclination to be successful administrators (the Jadidists, in this case) had been driven away and alienated in the previous phase. Furthermore, the foreign supporters of the insurgency would invariably be unable or unwilling to provide support in adequate amounts to the state it had set up. In the case of the Basmachi, a sharia state ruled by the Emir of Bukhara was unappealing to the majority of the population of Turkestan and could not have garnered support from the only nation capable of providing it in adequate quantities: such an Emirate would have been a threat to the British Empire's very existence.

Faced with the realities of living in the poorly administered state set up by the insurgency, the population that had supported it initially would become receptive to conciliatory offers tactically made by the government. The insurgency would fragment and its state would collapse under a new offensive from the government. At this point, the insurgency would again enter a phase of disruptive low-level warfare, which could last for decades but would ultimately be doomed to fade out. The Basmachi spent their last twenty years engaged in just such a doomed struggle. Their story, like those of their successors, is a tragic one, full of wasted opportunities and pointless sacrifices.

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