

## SOVIET ORIENTALISM AND CONGRESS OF THE PEOPLES OF THE EAST

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.54414/SSIB2826>

**Abstract:** This study aims to compare the Orientalism of Edward Said and the understanding of Orient in Tsarist Russia and, most importantly, in Soviet Russia. Based on this, the Bolsheviks began to develop Oriental studies in early Soviet Russia, setting themselves the task of approaching the East, and expecting a world revolution from the East.

Between 1917 and 1920 Soviet Russia experienced period of civil war, foreign intervention and expectations of revolution in Germany. When the Soviets realized that the revolution in the west could not be realized in a short time, they began to turn their attention to the east. On account of to break the influence of England in the east, they started a strict propaganda activity here. In a short time, they created institutions to learn the East and educate Marxist orientalists. The Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East in 1920, served to create the perception that the Soviets were friends of the Eastern peoples and to propagate against the British rule there. The executive organ of the Congress translated and delivered resolutions and propaganda materials to the countries of the East. Although the dream of the Soviets to start a revolution in the East lost its effect soon after the agreement with Great Britain.

**Keywords:** *The Baku Congress, Peoples of the East, Orientalism, Soviet Orientalism, Soviet Russia, World Revolution, Oriental Studies*

### INTRODUCTION

Until the late 1970s the phrase “Orientalism” had two specific definitions. “Orientalism” was an academic discipline, implied knowledge of complex languages. At the same time, for art historians "Orientalism" served as a name of the artistic directions of the 19th century, representatives of which were Ferdinand Delacroix, Eugene Fromentin and Jean-Louis Gerome. [Ван Дер Ойе (2002): 253] Orientalism was an academic tradition defined by travelers, commercial enterprises, military expeditions, natural historians and pilgrims to whom the Orient is a specific kind of knowledge about specific places, peoples, and civilizations. [Said (1979): 203]

The concept of “Orientalism” phenomenon changed after the publication of Edward Said’s book “Orientalism” in 1978. Now Orientalism did not refer to the refined occupations of the academics or artistic preference for the eastern exotics, but was understood definition of the Western imperialism, as an intellectual tool for ensuring the domination of the West over the East. [Ван Дер Ойе (2002): 253] Orientalism, described by Edward Said, is a broad discursive formation that underlies the European imagination, understanding and domination of the East. Orientalism wants to represent the East, not just to “the West”, but also to the East itself. [Khalid (2000): 693]

### Russia: East or West?

When it comes to Russia, the paradigm of Orientalism quickly raises questions. As can be clearly seen, the difficult division of borders around E. Said's analysis between East and West turns into the strange three words in the Russian context: Western, Russian, and Eastern. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Russia was mainly described as an oriental despotism in the Western literature. [Knight (2000): 77]

Russian Orientalism is a particularly interesting exception to Said's conception. In contrast to the marine colonial powers, the conquered imperial periphery of Russia bordered on its neighborhood. Unlike Britain and France, separated by the seas from "their" East, Russia's Eurasian geography has not created such barriers to the separation of the metropolis from the East. Thus, for the Russians, the line between them and East was not so clear. [Ван Дер Ойе (2002): 254] "A paradox of simultaneously inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe" was a Russian image. The Russian territory was still associated with what was alternatively termed *l'Europe orientale and l'Orient européen*. [Soboleva (2017): 20] In Fyodor Dostoevsky's words, "In Europe we were hangers-on and slaves, but in Asia we are masters. In Europe we were Tatars, but in Asia we too are Europeans". [Khalid (2000): 697]

Wilhelm Barthold noted that the nature of the "conquest" of Siberia, which was part of the "East" and control of Siberia, provided a different type of permanent presence for Russia in the East. He believed that "In Russia the Orient did not oppose the Occident, but it had been made an organic part of Russian history, so closely associated that it often determined its course". [Evans (1999): 41-42]

According to Karl Marx, the Russian Empire was an "Eastern despotism" and "semi-Asiatic" [Ван Дер Ойе (2002): 252]. Apparently, this is due to the fact that the military intervention of the Russian Empire played a major role in the suppression of the liberal-nationalist revolutions in Europe that took place in 1848-1849.

### Red Orientalism: Early Soviet Oriental Studies

On November 24, 1917, shortly after the October coup, when the Bolshevik party seized the power, the Soviet government issued a statement, addressing Muslims in Russia and the East. In the declaration, it was stated that Soviet Russia completely abandoned the colonial policy of the Tsarist Russia. The declaration also proclaimed that the tsar's secret agreements regarding the capture of Istanbul were invalid and that Istanbul should remain in the hands of the Turks. [Торговые отношения СССР со странами Востока (1938): 10] A similar note sent to the Iranian envoy in Petrograd on January 14, 1918, by the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, proclaiming that the Council of People's Commissars had terminated the Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907. All Russian troops in Iran were withdrawn from the country between December 1917 and January 1918. [Кирилин (1986): 95]

Soviet Russia was in its powerless period between 1917-1920, facing strong capitalist states. This was also a period of the civil war and dreams about impending world revolution in the industrialized countries, especially in Germany. The Soviet Russia was struggling with internal and external problems. Although Lenin could not effectively

support the short-lived Communist regimes (in Hungary, Bavaria, the Baltic states and Finland), he did not give up on his dream of world revolution. [Kulski (1959): 138]

Between 1918 and 1919, the eastern policy of Bolsheviks covered Baku, Tbilisi and Tashkent, rather than Ankara, Delhi or Beijing. Only after the decline of the revolutionary wave in Europe in 1920, a more active interest in Asia aroused. [Laqueur (1959): 8] Having given up hope of a socialist revolution in the West, the Bolsheviks tied their hopes to the spread of Bolshevism in the Eastern countries since the 1920s. Hoping that the “national-revolutionary” movement would turn into a socialist revolution, particularly in Turkey and Iran. [Гасанлы (2008): 19]

Throughout the 1920s, the Bolsheviks paid serious attention to the East for exporting the Bolshevik Revolution. [Bustanov (2015): 2] In the 1920s, the Bolsheviks created the new institutions and organizations intended to produce devotee Marxist scholars of Oriental studies. Moscow Institute for Oriental Studies (Московский институт востоковедения, МИВ) was the most important institute amongst others. This Institute created mainly for the requirements of the Soviet diplomatic services. Communist University of the Toilers of the Orient (Коммунистический университет трудящихся Востока, КУТВ) was founded in 1921 for educating the party members from Central Asia and Caucasus, as well as for training communists from abroad. [Kemper (2009): 4-5] These institutions were dedicated to work for the revolutionary transformation of the East, and all intellectual work has been subject to this reason. One of their significant figures was Mikhail Pavlovich, head of the Moscow Institute and founder of the journal *Новый Восток* (The New Orient) [Cronin (2015): 653]. The slogan “To Moscow, not to Mecca” calling the Muslims to unite with the Soviet Russia against the colonialism, also belongs to him. [Kemper, (2010): 436]

The new regime in Russia did not eliminate the Asiatic Museum (Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences after 1930), and it did not purge the famous Academics of the elder generation, like Wilhelm Barthold, Sergey F. Oldenburg or Ignaty Y. Krachkovskii. [Kemper (2009): 4] After the October Revolution, W. Barthold played an important role in the establishment of new institutions for Oriental studies. He assisted to develop a Latinized alphabet for the Turkic languages of Central Asia. [Evans (1999): 32]

In 1920s Soviet government tried to create image of the Soviet authorities as “anti-imperial”. Academics as Sergey Oldenburg and Nikolai Marr criticized the Western Oriental Studies and began to claim that the Soviet scholars were in the process of creating morally superior type of scholarship. [Tolz (2008): 80-81] But the East was an object of propaganda and political agitation for Communists. “Red Orientalism” was built upon European imagination about the East. With their Eurocentric understanding of history and society, Mikhail Pavlovich and his colleagues tried to create a new Marxist model of Orientalism. The Soviet Orientalism seemed to be a “civilizing mission” rather than the Western Orientalism. But while the Bolsheviks did establish a discourse on how to overcome the traditional “orientalism”, they used the same methods consciously as the “bourgeois” Orientalism. [Kemper (2010): 476]

### **Soviet Propaganda in the East: Congress of the Peoples of the East**

The basic principles of Soviet foreign policy were laid down in Vladimir Lenin's "Peace Decree". These were the policy of "proletarian internationalism" and "peaceful coexistence". On the one hand, this decree expressed support for the working class struggling to overthrow the bourgeoisie and establish communist regimes, and on the other hand, it aimed to live in peace with the capitalist states and to establish good relations with them. It was believed that both policies could be carried out simultaneously. [Zickel (1991): 401-402]

The failed revolutions in Germany and Hungary, the war against Poland and White Armies with their Western supporters put the young Soviet state in a difficult situation. In August 1919, War Commissar Leon Trotsky suggested that, with their limited power they would not succeed in Europe, they had to look to the East. For this purpose they organized a special Congress of the Peoples of the East, to take place in Baku after the Communist International (Comintern) Congress in Petrograd. [Kemper (2010): 445-446]

The Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East was opened on August 31, 1920, by Grigory Zinoviev, chairman of the Comintern. Co-organizers, Karl Radek, as Congress secretary, and Mikhail Pavlovich, as the Comintern's expert on the East, were together with him. [Kemper (2010): 448]

The congress was attended by 1,891 delegates from the following countries: Turkey, Persia, Egypt, India, Afghanistan, Baluchistan, Kashgar, China, Japan, Korea, Arabia, Syria, Palestine, Bukhara, Khiva, Dagestan, Northern Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Turkestan, Fergana, the Kalmuck Autonomous Region, the Tatar Republic, and the Far Eastern District. [Congress of the Peoples of the East Baku (1977): 163]

The main idea was that the Communists are fighting for the liberation of the East, and they had to join Russia to start the revolutionary movement against the Western colonial powers. Russia and the East were in need of each other. Victory of Communists against the Western interventions in Russia would support and inspire the Eastern revolutions. Withdrawal from the East would weaken the capitalist system in the West, and support the Soviet Russia [Kemper (2010): 447]. Lenin affirmed and successfully convinced his comrades-in-arms that the revolutionary movement of the Eastern peoples can now develop effectively, and achieve success only in direct connection with the revolutionary struggle of our Soviet Republic against international imperialism. [Lenin (1954): 5]. Now it was the turn to convince the peoples of the East with the aim of realizing Lenin's plans for the world revolution on new soil.

The Bolsheviks assumed that they could help liberate the Muslims of India and the Middle East from "the tyranny of the British" by starting revolution in Central Asia. In this regard V.I. Lenin wrote the following in his letter to the Congress:

*"The period of awakening of the East in the contemporary revolution is being succeeded by a period in which all the Eastern peoples will participate in deciding the destiny of the whole world, so as not to be simply an object of enrichment of others. The peoples of the East are becoming alive to the need for practical action, for every nation to take part in shaping the destiny of all mankind. [Lenin (1954): 22, 24]*

Also continuing such rhetoric, he expresses the readiness and duty of the Soviet Republic to unite around itself all the awakening peoples of the East and together with them to combat against the international imperialism.

As can be seen from the quotation, Lenin's letter to the congress participants is exclusively in the nature of propaganda, with the aim of rousing them to dynamic revolutionary activity. The text is very openly visible on what fronts he tried to divide the world. A similar sentiment reveals itself in the manifesto, accepted by the Congress, declaring "holy war" against imperialism. Most likely, the term "holy war" is a tool to attract the attention of the religious communities of the East, for whom this term had a special meaning. The Congress Manifesto demonstrates the same rhetoric, used by Lenin in his letter, that this "holy war" is a struggle for the liberation of the Peoples of the East, ending the division of mankind into oppressor peoples and oppressed peoples, and the achievement of universal human values, such as the complete equality of all peoples and races, whatever language they speak, whatever color of their skin and whatever religion they professed. The manifesto tries to convince everyone that this is a call to a holy war in order to put an end to the partition of countries into advanced and backward, dependent and independent, metropolitan and colonial. Emphasizing the class character of the holy war, the document states that it is for the liberation of all mankind from the yoke of capitalist and imperialist slavery, for the cessation of all forms of oppression of one people by another and all forms of exploitation of man by man. [Congress of the Peoples of the East (1977): 172]

The Manifesto of the Congress was calling all peoples of the east actually to the "holy war" against the British imperialism, without mentioning other leading countries of the world. It cannot be stated that the Bolsheviks were more amicable to other leading countries of the world, however to a great degree they were stimulated by the fact that many countries of the East were British colonies. It is for this reason that the text of the Manifesto is directed against Great Britain, which is notably emphasized in the following lines:

*"Into the holy war against the last citadel of capitalism and imperialism in Europe, against the nest of pirates and bandits by sea and land, against the age-old oppressor of all the peoples of the East, against imperialist Britain! Into the holy war for freedom, independence and happiness for all the peoples of the East, all the East's millions of peasants and workers enslaved by Britain!"* [Congress of the Peoples of the East (1977): 172]

Executive organ of the Congress was "Council for Propaganda and Action". The Council was organizing translation of the Congress resolutions and other propaganda materials into Turkish, Farsi and Arabic and delivering them to the Eastern countries. The Council was directed by the Comintern representatives A.E. Skachko and Mikhail Pavlovich. Its journal, *Народы Востока* (The Peoples of the East), was published in Russian and Turkish. [Kemper (2010): 453]

Yelena Stasova and Mikhail Pavlovich were acting as representatives of the Comintern in the Council of Action and Propaganda of the Peoples of the East and were appointed there on the recommendation of Grigory Zinoviev. [Lazitch and Drachkovitch (1972): 408]

According to the project prepared by Anatoly Skachko in 1921 on organizing the Communication Office of the Eastern Peoples Action and Propaganda Council, the Communication Office was publishing the periodic news bulletins with compilations from the local and foreign press in Baku. Based on the information obtained, the office



was preparing summaries of events and changes in the Eastern countries in the form of reports. Possible printed and cartographic materials of the East were collected and classified. [РГАСПИ, Фонд 85, Опись 19, Дело 29, (1921): 2-3]

Short courses on the Oriental Studies were organized to prepare the staff of the Communication Office. In these courses, geographical, ethnographic and cultural studies of the Eastern countries were carried out, as well as lectures on the economic, social and current political situation of the East. In addition, the employees of the Communications office were taking lessons on telegraph, bulletin, news summary and report preparation, as well as press techniques. The weight, coins, land and all other units of measurement of Eastern countries, were taught. [РГАСПИ, Фонд 85, Опись 19, Дело 29, (1921): 5]

The propaganda was not only against British imperialism, but also against the ruling class of the East. In his speech at the Congress, Bela Kun noticed that the revolution of the Peoples of the East will not end even after the rule of the foreign imperialists come to an end. It will not end with a system under the false slogan of democracy, seeks to continue the power of the sultans, shahs, emirs, pashas and beys. [Congress of the Peoples of the East Baku (1977): 128-129]

One of the results of the Baku Congress was that the Communists realized the lack of knowledge about the Orient. In October of 1921 the Central Committee decided to use the professors of Oriental Studies working in the pre-revolutionary Russia for the production of literature on the liberation movements in the East. [Kemper (2010): 455]

In December of 1921, M. Pavlovich was appointed the head of the All-Russian Scientific Society of Oriental Studies (Всероссийская научная ассоциация востоковедения, ВНАВ), subordinated to the Commissariat for Nationalities (Наркомнац). All-Russian Scientific Association of Oriental Studies was not a propaganda tool for foreign policy purposes, but became the major scientific organ of Oriental Studies in Russia. [Kemper (2010): 455, 456]

The Communists did not understand the East and they thought that the problems were simply “the peasant and territorial issues”. After the shift of international situation, the Communists changed their approach to the East. In 1921, after signing treaties of non-aggression with Turkey and Iran and a trade agreement with Great Britain, the Soviets stopped their massive anti-British propaganda in the East. The Council for Propaganda and Action was abolished, its journal was closed. The Oriental Revolution was just a function with regard to the West, revolutionizing the Orient was not a purpose in itself. [Kemper (2010): 454-455]

Despite G. Zinovev’s statement that a similar congress would be held every year, the second Congress of the Peoples of the East was never convened. [Lazitch and Drachkovitch (1972): 407]

After signing the Trade Agreement with Britain on March 1921, Nariman Narimanov, who was the director of the Near East Bureau of the RSFSR Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, was of the opinion that Georgy Chicherin’s views on the Eastern policy were completely wrong. N. Narimanov thought that the Bolsheviks, deceived by the British, were strangling the revolution in Iran with their own hands. As a matter of fact, according to him, similar wrong decisions were taken for Turkey as well. [АРПІІ SSA, F. 609 siy 1 sax.vah 91: 115]

Nariman Narimanov claimed that the revolutionary process that started in Iran was suppressed because Lloyd George wanted it, and accused G. Chicherin of destroying the Iranian revolution. G. Chicherin had to answer these accusations, since N. Narimanov gave wide coverage to these accusations in the “Eastern Question” section of his letter to the Central Committee. [Həsənli (2012): 125]

G. Chicherin, in his letter to the Secretary of the Central Control Commission, Yemelyan Yaroslavski, stated that he did not go beyond the line determined by the Central Committee in his Eastern policy. According to G. Chicherin, N. Narimanov's ideas on the Eastern policy were so different from the policy of the Central Committee that the Politburo had to remind him to follow the line of the Center. [Həsənli (2012): 126]

G. Chicherin said: “If we had the military power to seize Turkey, Iran and all of Afghanistan, we could enforce communism there by force. However, this is not possible. We must act very carefully, so, as not to turn the movement of the peoples of the East against us”. [Həsənli (2012): 126]

The reason for the change in the eastern policy after 1921 was the Soviets' movement to a period of defense policy that avoided military conflict. The Soviet Russia needed time to increase its economic potential. The Soviet government was hopeful that during these years a war would break out between the “imperialist” powers and that it would provide an opportunity. [Kulski (1959): 139]

## CONCLUSION

Although the Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in Baku in September 1920, was connected by the failed policy of the Bolsheviks to initiate the world revolution with the interaction of Muslim peoples, it occupies a special place in the history of the communist movement.

This unsuccessful attempt to raise the peoples of the east against Britain and its elites was due to the fact that the Bolsheviks did not have a definite strategy regarding the Eastern policy after the revolution. A communist revolution would hardly have been possible in the eastern countries where there was no industrial proletariat.

Agreeing with the basic principles of Marxism, L. Trotsky argued that Russia's survival depended on “permanent revolution” abroad. In his opinion, there had to be socialist revolutions in other countries for Russia to become an economically independent state. The region, where the Bolsheviks concentrated more, was the west. However when Bolsheviks, realized that they could not succeed in the west, they turned to the east. After the establishment of the soviet regimes in the Caucasus and Central Asia, they get close access to the eastern countries. They thought that their policies in the Caucasus and Central Asia would create a good perception in the east.

The Baku Congress of the Peoples of the East was organized in order to raise Soviets' reputation among the eastern nations and also to provoke the revolutionary movement in the east through propaganda and agitation. This attempt to collect the exploited and oppressed peoples in the colonial and semi-colonial countries, around revolutionary Russia was over with disillusion.

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