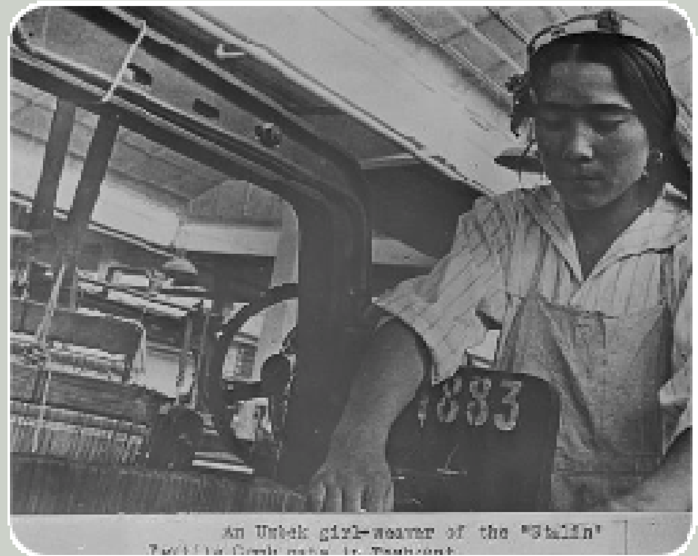
“DOWN WITH THE VEIL!”

The Limits of Liberation in the Soviet Union, 1919-1935

During the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet officials sought to persuade Muslim women to throw off the veil.

Image Courtesy of the Library of Congress Photographs and Prints Collection



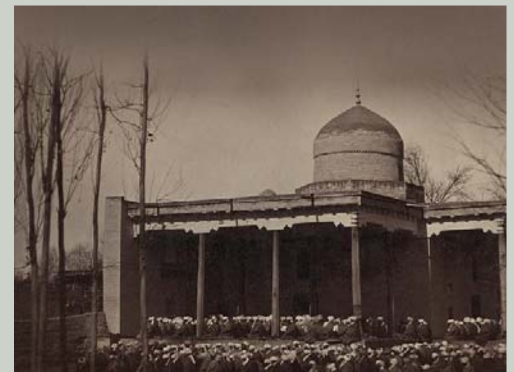
Communist Party activists in Tashkent launched their campaign to liberate women on the socialist holiday of International Women’s Day (March 8th) 1927, calling it a *hujum* or assault, against the “moldy old ways” of female seclusion and inequality. The unveiled Uzbek girl (above) worked in a textile factory during the 1930s.

By Douglas Northrop

For Ashur-Bibi Tashmatova, a thirteen year old Uzbek orphan living in the USSR during the 1920s, life presented few options. Following the death of her older sisters, she was forced to marry her sister’s widower, a forty-five year old who already had multiple wives. Although Tashmatova sought to escape her husband by repeatedly running away, her husband had her forcibly returned each time. At last, her husband’s execution for suspected anti-Soviet activities promised her an escape---but this escape was short-lived.

Once again, Tashmatova was forcibly married, this time to the head of the village Soviet. The marriage was as miserable as her first. Her new husband repeatedly threatened divorce and even hired assassins to kill her brother.

When this husband was also arrested and deported, Tashmatova threw off the heavy horsehair veil she and many other Muslim Uzbek



Communal Prayer at a mosque in Tashkent, Uzbekistan in the late nineteenth century, before the Bolshevik Revolution.

Image Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Collection

wore to become, at last, a model Soviet woman...or so Soviet propaganda claimed.

By 1935, when Tashmatova's story was told at a political congress in Tashkent, the wider Stalin Revolution had been underway for seven years. Throughout this period, several massive state and party campaigns sought to build a new kind of civilization in the USSR.

These all-encompassing Stalinist campaigns aimed to create a new kind of Soviet citizen, through a "cultural revolution" that would produce a New Soviet Man and, although usually less prominently, a New Soviet Woman.

If these campaigns were to succeed in the far-flung Soviet republics of Central Asia, they had to be translated into everyday life. This meant Muslim women needed to embrace and promote the goals of the revolution.

In Tashkent, Party activists launched a campaign to liberate women on the socialist holiday of International Women's Day (March 8th) 1927. They called this campaign a *hujum*, or assault, against the "moldy old ways" of female seclusion and inequality.

The *hujum* took different forms in different places, but in Uzbekistan, as well as Tajikistan and Azerbaijan, it aimed above all at the eradication of the heavy head-to-toe veils of horsehair and cotton that urban Muslim women and girls over the age of 9 or 10 wore in the presence of unrelated men.

Despite the almost complete absence from party ranks of Uzbek women, the mostly Russian activists of the *Zhenotdel* (the party's Women's Department) aimed to complete the heroic liberation of Central Asian women

Ethnic Diversity in the USSR

Soviet citizens belonged to many different ethnic groups, spoke different languages, and followed different religious and cultural traditions. Party officials believed unifying these groups through a cultural revolution was crucial.

On the left, a "liberated" Uzbek girl assembles machinery during the 1930s. On the right, her slightly more conservative counterparts study botany on a collective farm during the same period.

Images Courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs

in less than six months—a schedule that would enable them to celebrate success by October 1927, the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The campaign against the veil was complicated, contested, and contradictory; over the next fifteen years, it transformed all sides.

Who were the women that responded to the Soviet call to throw off the veil?

Some were the wives and relatives of Communist Party members, especially high-ranking ones, who faced strong pressure to liberate their families at the outset of the unveiling campaign. Desperately poor female beggars and especially prostitutes—few of whom in any case had worn veils before—also sought *Zhenotdel* aid and support. Other Uzbek women unveiled for just the reasons party activists expected: they resented the restrictions placed on local women. For these women, the Soviet campaign brought new possibilities, even a real liberation. Although some unveilings were coerced by over-eager Bolshevik activists, the positive appeal of the campaign was also evident in the social locations of women who flocked to the cause. Shadieva, for example, came from a poor family: at age 11, she had been married against her will, to a middle-aged folk-healer, becoming his eighth wife.

Local women who unveiled during and after 1927 disproportionately often came from marginal social positions: orphans, widows, and runaway girls, for example, sought refuge in Soviet institutions and women's clubs far out of proportion to their overall numbers.

But for the most part, Uzbek women who considered unveiling (or otherwise cooperated with Soviet activists) faced enormous pressure from their families and neighbors. Husbands could prevent unveiled wives from attending Soviet meetings or parades, and they threatened to divorce wives who unveiled.

Outside the home, any unveiled woman was assumed to be the equivalent of a prostitute, and frequently was treated as such. Fights broke out when schoolchildren taunted classmates about their newly unveiled mothers—who had, they shouted, taken up prostitution. Raised in a culture that stressed honor as a paramount female virtue, unveiled women faced mockery and ridicule at every turn.

The continual mutterings of "prostitute" from passersby had an effect, sometimes reducing the demoralized women to tears; they pleaded for help from Soviet authorities, saying that soon they would be driven to reveil.

"The Uzbek woman is very cautious," a Soviet report noted. "She boldly and confidently walks to women's meetings—unveiled. And to [Soviet] family circles; she goes [unveiled] wherever she knows that she will not run into insults, ridicule, and mockery. [But] it is hard to find unveiled women at the bazaars, or on the lively streets of the Old Cities. Here [the Uzbek woman] tries to

An Uzbek woman with her children. She wears a head-to-toe robe of heavy cotton, known as a *paranji,* which holds in place over her face a *chachvon*, or mesh screen of woven horsehair.

Source: Rossisskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv kinofotodokumentov

cover herself, that is, [she veils] in those places where insults can most often be heard directed at the unveiled."

Perhaps most surprising to Soviet activists at the time (and to Western readers today), a few women even led the charge on the other side, bitterly denouncing the *hujum*, flatly refusing even to discuss the possibility of unveiling, and harshly criticizing women who did take part. Party activists were befuddled to find veiled women as well as men behind the street harassment and insults.

In a handful of explosive cases—discussed only in whispers, and recorded in top-secret party dossiers—Uzbek women even organized violent resistance to their own "liberation." In May 1929, for example, the secret police reported on one such anti-Soviet gathering of 200 women in rural Andijon province. The women complained that their veils had been forcibly confiscated on March 8th, and they decided to hold a protest march on May Day—but events soon spiraled out of control.

Led by Ugul Bi Rajababaeva, the wife of a former Soviet official, they marched to the local soviet office building and demanded the return of their veils. When they were rebuffed, Rajababaeva pulled a knife on a senior police officer, who quickly fled the room. The women regrouped and about a dozen of them decided to try again—two days later, they showed up at the police officer's home, armed with knives and stones. Neither the officer nor his wife were at home, though, so the battalion of angry women then roamed the town, confronting and "savagely beating" unveiled women they found on the street.

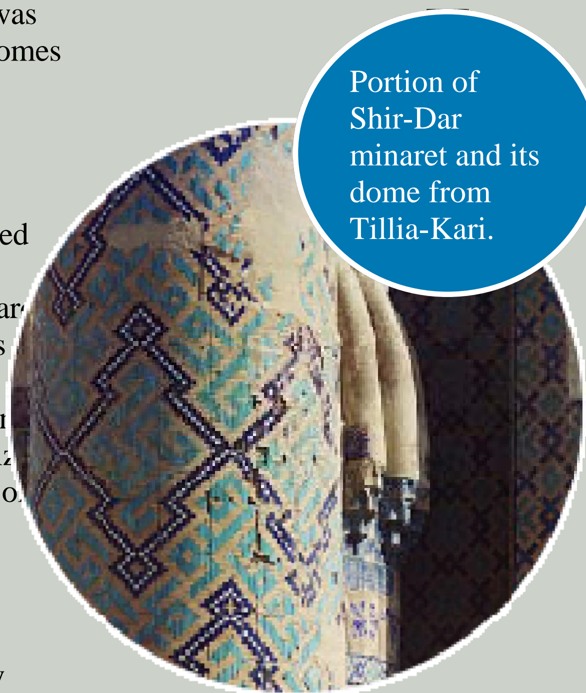
As this story demonstrates, Uzbek responses to the unveiling campaign were obviously complicated. Given the varied meanings applied to the veil, the tenacity with which it was both attacked and defended becomes more understandable.

In the longer term, the Soviet decision in 1927 to focus on dramatic public unveilings proved mostly counterproductive; by hardening Muslim hostility towar Bolshevik agitators perceived as foreign urban atheists, it made cultural change more, rather thar less, difficult. And by characteriz the veil as an important symbol o Muslim Uzbek culture, the Bolsheviks only gave it new strength.

Bolshevik leaders inadvertently reinforced the seclusion of Uzbek women in the short term, effectively creating powerful resistance to their own women's liberation policies. Despite their stated goals to the contrary, Soviet efforts played a large role in creating the veil as a national symbol and an emblem of a "tradition" that was in fact quite new.

Although the campaign of 1927 aimed to eliminate the veil within six months, it actually took far longer—perhaps thirty years or so—until the *paranji* and *chachvon* faded from everyday use.

Douglas Northrop is an associate professor of history at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is also the author of *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Central Asia*, available here at Amazon.



Portion of Shir-Dar minaret and its dome from Tillia-Kari.

PETITION SIGNED BY TWENTY FEMALE TEACHERS

If your fine statements about the liberation of women were sincere, then we ask you to consider this petition at the next meeting of the City Soviet and to finally resolve, once and for all, the question of unveiling before March 8th [International Women's Day].

In the past, when we languished [at home, surrounded by] four walls, we endured the outrages of our husbands; now we, liberated women, appear as prostitutes in the imaginations of women who still wear the paranji.

Is this the reward of a proletarian government to us?

Having started [to pursue] the issue, you did not drive it to a conclusion and then [you] started to say that unveiling is a matter of the free will of women themselves. Based on this declaration, nearly all of the women who still wear the paranji are denouncing us for having sold out our faith, calling us shameless [women] and dogs of the street. …

At the time of our liberation, you told us that with regards to people who responded badly [both] to liberation and liberated women, you would take the very strictest measures. In this we still are not satisfied. On the streets, at weddings, in other gatherings, everywhere and all around, we see and hear [nothing but] scornful attitudes and bad opinions, both from men and from women who are not unveiled.

[*The petitioners admit that reporting such episodes to the Zhenotdel, the City Soviet, or the Raikom has sometimes secured results: arrests and some convictions have followed*.]

But this has not at all given us any guarantee against cases of murder during our trips out of town or, just as much, the fermentation induced on secluded, out-of-the-way streets by the appearance of [our unveiled] faces. Against whom, then, can our lifeless body be avenged?

If even we working women, the loyal followers of Lenin, are [treated like this, facing insults and humiliation with every step], then nothing will be left for us but to shout '*Voidod*!' ['Help!'] and to shout it not once, but thousands of times.

If you are not able to bring about the liberation of women, then we cannot go any farther. [But] if a tree's roots remain [strong], then it will not wither away when attacks come on the surface.

If you really intend decisively to attack the *paranji*, then we request of you the following:

1. If a woman in a *paranji* brings wares to the market, let no one buy from her.
2. Cooperatives are not to sell goods to women in *paranjis.*
3. The judicial organs are not to hear the requests of women in *paranjis*.
4. Women in *paranjis* are not to be given medicines by clinics and drugstores.
5. Members of the party and Komsomol, if their wives wear the *paranji,* are to be removed from their positions.
6. The daughters and sons of merchants are not to be accepted in Soviet schools.

If you do not implement these requests of ours before March 8th, then do not blame your Red Teachers if they once again begin to wear the *paranji.*