Red Jihad: Translating Communism in the Muslim Caucasus

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> Now we summon you to the first genuine holy war, under the red banner of the Communist International. We summon you to a holy war for your own well-being, for your freedom, for your life.
> —Congress of the Peoples of the East, *Manifesto to the Peoples of the East* (1920)

The translation of Marxism-Leninism on the Soviet periphery generated a paradox—Muslim communism. This notion was paradoxical not because it proposed an encounter between communism and Islam but because it institutionalized a new form of political subjectivity that operated simultaneously within discourses of Soviet hegemony and discourses of anti-imperialism. Muslim communism envisioned a Soviet totality that nonetheless proclaimed the self-determination of nationalist movements as part of its constitution. The term *Muslim*, which under the Russian Empire

began to signify a category of nationhood, joined communism as part of a national Bolshevik project.[1] The enterprise of building a Muslim communist idea thus promoted both national self-determination movements and the consolidation of Soviet power on the imperial periphery. It was an orientalist enterprise, and notably one that rendered legible the collaborative formation of Soviet imperial power through its avowal of anti-imperial resistance. The narrative of the formation of Muslim communism exposes the contradiction between the inherently international purview of socialism, understood as the destruction of propertied classes, and statist nationalism, which is reliant on the creation of state property.[2] In this way, Muslim communism was also part of a Soviet modernity project, that is, the global expansion of communism through both the translation and transculturation of Bolshevik ideology.

In his "Address to the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organizations of the Peoples of the East" in 1919, Vladimir Lenin describes the central role of translation in mobilizing the peoples of the East in the Soviet battle against the united imperialism of Germany, France, Britain, and the United States.[3] He explains that translations of the Russian Soviet constitution served as the strongest weapon because instead of defeating the imperial troops the translations won them over and converted them to the Soviet cause.[4] In Lenin's vision, Soviet Russia was armed with a uni-

1. For a discussion of Islam and nationalism in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus, see Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jaddidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 184–97.
2. For a summary of this debate, including Louis Dupeux's discussion of 1920s Germany and Mikhail Agursky's analysis of 1920s Russia, see Erik van Ree, "The Concept of 'National Bolshevism': An Interpretive Essay," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 6, no. 3 (2001): 289–307.
3. Drawing on Lenin's discussions of the necessity of national language propaganda, Yuri Slezkine similarly argues that the Leninist paradox was built on the tension between the unity of the Soviet revolutionary cause and efforts to foster the diversity of national cultures within the Soviet system through the process of translation. Slezkine frames this tension through a historical comparison to the Il'minsky system's use of national language education to spread Christianity. See Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52. The Il'minsky system was a strategy of bilingual education based on the efforts of Nikolai Il'minsky (1822–91), a Russian linguist, translator, and missionary, who attempted to spread Christianity among the Tatar Muslim population of Kazan through the use of bilingual Turkic and Russian language instruction. See Isabelle Kreindler, "Educational Policies toward the Eastern Nationalities in Tsarist Russia: A Study of the Il'minskii System" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1969).
4. Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, "Address to the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist

versally translatable ideology that rendered it invincible. The power of the Soviet Union, he writes, was realized in the fact that "the word *soviet* is now understood by everybody, and the Soviet constitution has been translated into all languages and is known to every worker."[5] For Lenin, the true success of the Soviet Union lay in its ability to make the notion of the political body of the council or *soviet* not only legible but understandable to the peoples of the East. In this framing, the translation of the word *soviet* as a metonymy for the multilingual nation provided the ammunition necessary for Soviet soldiers to defeat imperialism. Lenin thus defines translation as the primary strategy for Soviet conquest.

Distinguishing the Soviet conquest from capitalist imperialism, Lenin explains that Soviet ideology and its translation account for the "miracle" (*chudo*) of the Soviet victory in the East.[6] Attributing this military success to the translatability of the *soviet*, Lenin elides the secular practice of translation with the spiritual phenomenon of the miracle, investing Bolshevik ideology with both a spiritual and a scientific authority—that is, both a sacred and a secular one. Lenin's insistence on the *miracle* of the Soviet victory indeed recalls the connection between nineteenth-century Russian imperial expansion and Russian Orthodoxy.[7] However, in mythologizing Soviet colonization, he also implicitly describes the process of the secularization of the former empire as a miracle. Lenin thus links the processes

Organizations of the Peoples of the East," in *To See the Dawn: Baku, 1920—First Congress of the Peoples of the East*, ed. John Riddell (New York: Pathfinder, 1993), 293; Lenin, "Doklad na II Vserossiiskom s'ezde kommunisticheskikh organizatsii narodov Vostoka 22 noiabria 1919," vol. 39 of *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 55 tomakh* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1958–65), 329.

5. Lenin, "Address to the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organizations of the Peoples of the East," 293; Lenin, "Doklad na II Vserossiiskom s'ezde kommunisticheskikh organizatsii narodov Vostoka 22 noiabria 1919," 39:329.

6. Lenin, "Address to the Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organizations of the Peoples of the East," 254; Lenin, "Doklad na II Vserossiiskom s'ezde kommunisticheskikh organizatsii narodov," 39:329.

7. Orthodoxy was defined as a central component of Russian imperial identity in the nineteenth century, as emblematized by the official state slogan of the 1830s, "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality," defined by Sergei Uvarov, an advisor to Tsar Nicholas I and minister of education. See Nathaniel Knight, "Ethnicity, Nationality, and the Masses: *Narodnost'* and Modernity in Imperial Russia," in *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices*, ed. David L. Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 54. Historian Francine Hirsch notes that Uvarov's choice of the term *narodnost'* reflects his effort to distinguish Russia from other European states. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 37.

of both imperial expansion and secularization to the act of translation. The translation of the *soviet* functions for Lenin both as a religious miracle, with its authority rooted in the imperial past, as well as a secular form of socio-psychological governance, with its authority secured in the Soviet future. Translation not only mythologizes the *soviet* but also crucially authorizes a seamless *translatio imperii* from Russian Orthodox imperial hegemony to the scientific gaze of the Soviet colonial enlightenment project. The power of Lenin's rhetorical gesture lies in its capacity to reinscribe an authoritative discourse of Russian imperial rule onto the Soviet secular political ideology.

The authority of Soviet translation was also shaped by the reception of Marxist-Leninist theory in local intellectual circles in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The word *soviet* encountered its Turkic double in *shura*, which appeared in the titles of coordinating committees of Muslim organizations during the early twentieth century and was the name of one of the most influential Turkic journals in the Russian Empire.[8] The shared meaning of *soviet* and *shura* as "council" and the competing secular national and religious local political institutions they represented elided structures of power between the former Russian imperial territories and the emerging Soviet empire. Furthermore, *shura* not only denotes a council but specifically refers to the representative democratic sociopolitical organization of Islam. It emphasizes justice, equality, and dignity and is the name of Surah 42 in the Qur'an. The Islamic scholar Fazlur Rahman writes, "To carry on their collective business (government), the Qur'an asks them [Muslims] to institute *shura* (a consultative council or assembly), where the will of the people can be expressed by representation."[9] The translation of the word thus could simultaneously signify the Soviet government, the postrevolutionary local Muslim committees, and Islamic ideals of justice. The transference of meaning between languages as well as within a single language also contributed to the formation of a Muslim communist consciousness, as an arbiter of a secularized form of "Islamic" or "Muslim" justice.

While Lenin's view of translation as the basis of Soviet power enabled the dissemination of Muslim communism, a more complex aesthetic-political infrastructure informed its construction. I call this theoretical framework "the Marxist-Leninist linguistic turn." This linguistic turn

8. While these groups emerged after the 1917 revolution, their creation reflected the new liberties in the postimperial society rather than direct affiliations with Bolshevik networks. See Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 245–69.
9. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 43.

signals the role of philosophy, specifically dialectical materialism, in mobilizing avant-garde aesthetics and the principles of translation to legitimate Soviet political sovereignty on the imperial periphery. Theorist Boris Groys discusses the role of philosophy in a process he calls the "linguistification of society."[10] This transformation signals a shift in the social structure from an economic to a discursive base, which obscures the distinctions between the operational functions of the aesthetic and the political. Groys writes that the Soviet Union's vision of itself as "a state governed by philosophy alone" enacted the revolutionary process of "the transcription of society from the medium of money into the medium of language."[11] The centrality of the domain of linguistics to the formation of communism, including the role of language, philosophy, and critical thought, lends power to translation and aesthetics as forces contributing to the transformation of society. According to this schema, Groys argues, communist society, which governs according to dialectical materialist philosophy, is organized around the idea that being should be understood as "the (self)contradictoriness of the world in its totality, which determines individual consciousness."[12] Being determines the conscious actions of the totality of society through its internal contradictions. That is, it can both determine the conscious actions of society and express inherently paradoxical contradictions only because it is mediated through language and discursive social exchange. However, communism not only is based on this figure of paradox but also forms a system of governance that is mediated through language and authorized by the *exposure* and *avowal* of the paradox as a means of empowering the philosopher to govern. Indeed, a paradox that conceals itself ultimately ceases to be discursive and becomes a commodity.[13] In this way, the aesthetics of political art, particularly in the complex context of the national Bolshevik campaign, exposes the discursive character of Soviet politics and the role of language and translation in the expansion and consolidation of Soviet power. The Marxist-Leninist linguistic turn thus renders legible the process of the translation of the *soviet* on the imperial periphery.

The government sponsorship of artistic and literary materials framed

10. Groys argues that the total linguistification of society promises the creation of "a kingdom of philosophy" and the "rule of dialectical, paradoxical reason—as the answer to the paradoxical character of capital and the commodity as described by Marx." Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, trans. Thomas H. Ford (New York: Verso, 2009), 29.
11. See Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, xv–xxiv.
12. Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, 35.
13. See Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, 29.

their content as agitation propaganda, or agitprop as it was called in the vernacular. While print culture played a major role in the dissemination of agitprop, in the multilingual spaces of the Caucasus and Central Asia, translations of words and ideas became necessary to the creation of an international Soviet community. Translation as a form of linguistic exchange offers a model of the paradoxical structure of national Bolshevism in its self-contradictory totality. The formation of a Soviet community in the Caucasus and Central Asia was imagined not only through language but also through the creation of a Muslim communist consciousness. The Marxist-Leninist linguistic turn expanded the idea of language and the legible as an inter-pretive community. Agitprop not only relied on an imagined linguistic com-munity but also drew on aesthetic form and the sensible to envision Muslim communism. Agitprop's innovation of Soviet linguistics realized the gover-nance of society through the medium of language and the affirmation of the paradoxical principles of dialectical materialism.

The function of paradox as the legitimating form of Soviet sover-eignty provided a model for a total, universal, or global political structure governed by language and the processes of translation. Crucially, this model also incorporated forms of resistance within its own structures of power. This early Bolshevik politics of inclusion, quickly abandoned for forms of russophone hegemony, established and maintained Soviet control over the imperial periphery during the civil war. The consequence of for-mulating this political program based on the form of paradox not only regu-lated an internally contradictory vision of the totality of the political field, but it operated through the affirmation of forms of inclusion instead of exclu-sion.[14] In this way, the Soviet state proclaimed both its own sovereignty and the right of national self-determination and the creation of forms of national Bolshevism.

Muslim communism's affirmation of both Soviet sovereignty and anti-imperial resistance presents a compelling example of the ways (post)-colonial agency is constituted through a model of dialectical materialist totality. The architecture of the Soviet colonial ideology and its transla-tion in the Soviet "East" resonate with what Fredric Jameson has called "the theory of the cognitive aesthetics of third-world literature."[15] Indeed, Jameson's essentialization of the Third World as an ontological category in his infamous "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capital-

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14. See Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, 38.
15. Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65–88, 88n26.

ism" has received much criticism since the essay's publication in 1986.[16] However, the notion of a historically and materially determined "cognitive aesthetics," which Jameson presents at the conclusion of his discussion of Third World allegory, highlights the role of the psychic space of cognition in constituting the relationship between imperial ideology and (post)colonial agency. As Robert Young and others have argued, Muslim communism in particular and national Bolshevism more broadly had a critical historical impact on the development of tricontinental postcolonial intellectual thought.[17]

While Jameson's term may be useful, the historical and material constitution of a conscious subject can perhaps more fruitfully be traced to Frantz Fanon's corpus of work—particularly *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth*—as well as contemporary engagements with his thought by scholars such as Ranjana Khanna, Richard Keller, Anne McClintock, and Robert Young.[18] Discussing the ways psychoanalysis is refashioned through its location as a colonial discipline, Khanna argues in *Dark Continents* that for Fanon the relationship between the colonizer and colonized is not reducible to a dialectical opposition in which otherness is constitutive of an oppositional subjectivity. Redeeming Fanon's model from critiques of its Manichaean dualism, she emphasizes that the historical and material constitution of the psyche of the black man accounts for a radical otherness and antagonism that confirms wholeness.[19] A cognitive aesthetics of (post)colonial agency such as Khanna's reading of Fanon thus generates a space for articulating the relationship between colonial power and anti-imperial resistance. Particularly in the context of Soviet Muslim com-

16. Important critiques of Jameson's article center on its reductionist vision of a collective, dispossessed, "Third World" other who remains merely a substitute for the exploration of the relationship between art and politics in the West, and his crude application of the Marxist notions of base and superstructure to non-Western cultural production. The most famous response to Jameson remains Aijaz Ahmad, "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text* 17 (1987): 3–25.
17. Robert Young prefers the term *tricontinental* as a more politically neutral descriptor of the geopolitical regions often referred to as the "Third World." See Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 161–81.
18. See Ranjana Khanna, *Dark Continents: Psychoanalysis and Colonialism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Richard C. Keller, *Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Robert J. C. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
19. See Khanna, *Dark Continents*, 172–73.

munism, colonial power was conceived through both the institution of psychiatry, indeed a topic deserving of its own attention, and the institution of Marxist-Leninist linguistics, which was itself interpolated through contemporary Soviet cognitive psychology.[20] Muslim communism not only incorporated anti-imperial resistance into a model of imperial power, but, as a language with its own Marxist-Leninist cognitive aesthetics, it also outlined a project for the role of art in regulating consciousness.

Bolshevik efforts to develop Muslim communism were brief, beginning with the end of the civil war and the consolidation of Soviet power in the Caucasus and Central Asia in the 1920s, and ending with Joseph Stalin's consolidation of power and the shift toward Russification in the 1930s. During the civil war, the immanent threat to Bolshevik power in the Caucasus and Central Asia—from the resistance of the White Army and British imperial interests in Central and South Asia—motivated the promotion of national identity as a constitutive feature of early Soviet modernity. Lenin reconciled the idea of the national bourgeoisie with the international solidarity of the working class by arguing that both were forms of nationalism. In the former imperial territories, class functioned alongside national questions, defining the federalist structure of the republic.[21]

Local Muslim reformist groups that developed under Russian imperial control also proved an important force in these collaborations, having cultivated a public sphere through the local intelligentsia's cultural reforms, particularly in the domains of education, theater, and print culture.[22] In this way, the local Muslim reformist intelligentsias in the Caucasus and Central Asia also contributed to the formation of identitarian politics, appropriating the terms *Muslim* and *Turk* to nationalist ends, even if these terms were often framed supranationally. In the Caucasus, Muslim modernists rallied behind a supranational identity defined by the territory of the Caucasus, as well as by the ethnolinguistic and confessional terms *Turk* and

20. Many of the linguists related to the Bakhtin circle explored the cognitive dimensions of linguistics in relation to the work of psychiatrist Lev Vygotsky. See especially Valentin Voloshinov, *Freidizm: Kriticheskii ocherk* (*Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*) (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdate"stvo, 1927); and Voloshinov, *Marksizm i filosofiia iazyka* (*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*) (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929). See also Caryl Emerson, "The Outer Word and Inner Speech: Bakhtin, Vygotsky, and the Internalization of Language," *Critical Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1983): 245–64.

21. See Young, *Postcolonialism*, 123.

22. These Central Asian reformist groups were called *Jadids*, whose name derives from *usul ul-jadid* (new school), referring to their educational reforms. See Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 89–93.

Muslim. These terms were constantly in flux, precisely because they were overdetermined by an excess of meaning. Sometimes "Muslim" signified a secular confessional nationalism, while in other instances there was no distinction between the idea of the Muslim community and the Islamic faith. Islam was conceived in terms of the abstract value of sacred texts, separate from practice, while at the same time it was linked to the welfare of a modern polity. The revolution did not create ex nihilo but rather institutionalized collaborations between Muslim reformists and Bolshevik politicians. In particular, the incongruence between the rural illiterate masses and the urban, educated elite created a necessity for Muslim reformists to collaborate with the Bolsheviks. After 1917 and the collapse of the tsarist autocracy, however, local reformers no longer saw the state as an enemy. Now it was a potential force for change. For many, the state promised a new public forum for political demonstration.

The Bolsheviks created the People's Commissariat of Nationalities (Narkomnats: Narodnyi komissariat po delam national'nostei) even before the revolution in June 1917 to promote an anti-imperial ideological stance. Building on this policy, in the 1920s the Soviet government instituted the nativization reforms known as *korenizatsiia* (literally, taking root).[23] These reforms installed local pro-Bolshevik leaders and promoted the use of local languages with the intention that Soviet power would take root and spread through national self-determination movements. The official position of Muslim communist politicians, including the leader of the Muslim division of the Commissariat of Nationalities, Mirsaid Sultan Galiev, and the playwright and leader of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, Nariman Narimanov, focused on the strategic geopolitical and economic position of the Caucasus and Central Asia.[24] Following Lenin, Sultan Galiev and Narimanov argued that since the oppressed eastern nations accounted for the major lines of production of imperialism, efforts to galvanize Muslim com-

23. The *korenizatsiia* policies in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Siberia, the Crimea, and the Volga included the promotion of local administrators to Soviet posts and the institutionalization of local languages in government and educational sectors. For a discussion, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 129–81.

24. Indeed, the two men were in contact as early as 1905, when Sultan Galiev moved to Baku. In 1918, Mirsaid Sultan Galiev was appointed head of the Muslim division (Muskom) of the People's Commissariat of Nationalities, created in 1917 to manage the work of local pro-Bolshevik leaders. In 1920, Nariman Narimanov was elected chairman of the Azerbaijani Revolutionary Committee (Azrevkom) and then chairman of the Council of the People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) of the new Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic.

munism would rob Western capitalism of its economic base.[25] In an article in *The Life of Nationalities* (*Zhizn' nationnal'nostei*) published on August 9, 1920, Sultan Galiev describes Soviet Azerbaijan as the center of the communist world revolution. He writes, "The sovietization of Azerbaijan is a highly important step in the evolution of communism in the Near East. . . . Soviet Azerbaijan, with its old and experienced proletariat and its already consolidated Communist Party—the Hummat Party—will become the Red lighthouse for Persia, Arabia, and Turkey."[26] Narimanov also emphasized Azerbaijan's direct role in supplying oil to the Soviet Union.[27] Beyond the Soviet borders, Muslim communism established itself as a global historical force, shaping the intellectual legacy of twentieth-century tricontinental Marxism.

While Sultan Galiev and Narimanov expressed a strong commitment to discourses of national Bolshevism, both had attended traditional Islamic schools and discovered Marxism while pursuing higher education. Sultan Galiev was particularly influenced by Islamic modernist reform movements in the Russian Empire.[28] While most of these local reform movements were based on a form of Sunni Islam, Narimanov and the Azerbaijani Bolsheviks came from a Shia background and followed a slightly different current of thought. In addition to sectarian differences, the two men also experi-

25. See Mirsaid Sultan Galiev, "The Social Revolution and the East," in *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World*, ed. Alexandre A. Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 131–37; and Nariman Narimanov, *K istorii nashei revoliutsii v okrainakh* (Baku: Tipografiya AN Azerb. SSR, 1990), 28–29.

26. Cited in Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, eds., *Muslims of the Soviet Empire: A Guide* (London: C. Hurst, 1985), 54.

27. See Narimanov, *K istorii nashei revoliutsii v okrainakh*, 41.

28. According to the historians Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, the first Muslim reform movements that began to rally for educational reforms in 1904 were known according to the Arabic appellation *Islah*, meaning reform. Bennigsen and Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Sultan Galiev, le père de laevolutionn tiers-mondiste* (Paris: Fayard, 1986), 44. Local Muslim modernist reform in the Russian Empire was related to the Jadidist movement in Central Asia. However, Jadidist reform was based on Sunni Islam, while the Muslims of the south Caucasus were largely followers of Shia Islam and thus tended to operate outside of this main reform movement. Instead, Marxism served as a point of convergence for Muslim reformists in the Russian Empire who were divided by sectarian differences. For discussions of Jadidism in the Russian Empire, see Azade-Ayşe Rorlich, *The Volga Tatars: A Profile in National Resilience* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986); and Ingeborg Baldauf, "Jadidism in Central Asia within Reformism and Modernism in the Muslim World," *Die Welt des Islams* 41, no. 1 (2001): 72–88.

enced varied levels of Russification. Sultan Galiev learned Russian from his father, a schoolteacher, and encountered Marxism through fellow revolutionaries such as the Saint Petersburg–educated Tatar intellectual Mulla Nur Vahitov while studying at the Teacher's School of Kazan. Narimanov grew up in Tiflis (Tbilisi), the administrative capital of the Russian Empire, where he was surrounded by Russian intellectuals and bureaucrats. He also received a Russian-language education in the state-sponsored Gori Teacher's Seminars. Unlike Sultan Galiev, who concerned himself more generally with Muslim reform among the diverse communities of Muslim Tatars, Narimanov pursued a reform agenda focused on Azeri language reform and a critique of the Shia clergy. In particular, he sought to institutionalize the Azeri language through the creation of local theater troupes and the development of an Azeri-language press.

The two men met in Baku during Sultan Galiev's first trip at the beginning of World War I. In Baku, Sultan Galiev began publishing extensively in local papers, including *Caucasian Discourse* (*Kavkazskoe slovo*), *Baku*, and the *Caucasian Kopek* (*Kavkazskaia kopeika*), under the pseudonyms "Kel'ke-Bash" and "Mirsaid." In 1917, he founded the newspaper *News of the Baku Muslim Social Organizations* (*Izvestiia Bakinskikh musul'manskikh ovschestvennykj organizatsii*).[29] After returning to Moscow and Kazan, Sultan Galiev began his career in the party. He was first elected to the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Muslim Board. After developing a close relationship with Stalin, he rose to the rank of Commissar of Nationalities and became coeditor of its official journal, *The Life of Nationalities*, in which he published his most famous essays. In 1923, he was arrested on charges of nationalist deviation, notably carrying a copy of Narimanov's famous treatise *Toward a History of Our Revolution in the Outskirts* (*K istorii nashei revoliutsii v okrainakh*) in his pocket.[30]

As both Anouar Abdel-Malek and Robert Young have noted, Sultan Galiev's ideas laid the foundation for tricontinental Marxism. Sultan Galiev,

29. For information about Sultan Galiev's publishing history in Baku, see R. G. Landa, "Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev," *Voprosy istorii KPSS* 8 (1999), http://historystudies.org/2012/07/landa-r-g-mirsaid-sultan-galiev/.
30. "Minutes of the Meeting of Senior Official of the Baku Organization," July 11, 1923, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sotsial'no-politicheskoi Istorii (RGASPI), f. 588, op. 2, d. 178, l. 50–51. I am grateful to Sara Brinegar for this citation. Though Sultan Galiev was expelled from the party, he was freed from prison after his first arrest, only to be arrested a second time in 1928, released into exile, and finally arrested yet again in 1937, shortly after which he was shot.

Young writes, in "identifying with the revolutionary pan-Islamism of al-Afghānī, . . . also emphasized what was to become a fundamental political identification of tricontinental societies, dividing the world into the oppressors and the oppressed."[31] While Sultan Galiev identifies the relationship between imperial and class politics, his detailed account of the "oppressed nations" falls instead within his designs for Soviet propaganda. He writes, "Thus, the particular position of Islam, which can be explained, on the one hand, by its greater vitality resulting from its late appearance and, on the other hand, by the psychological state of the oppressed or only lately liberated Muslim peoples [Muslims of Russia], necessitates an approach and new methods of antireligious propaganda."[32] Sultan Galiev concludes that it is the role of Muslim communists to organize Soviet propaganda efforts, which emphasize the role of politics in transcending the division between the public and private spheres. He writes, "We must carry on the campaign in daily life, by our example and activities."[33] What is perhaps most innovative about Sultan Galiev's vision of Muslim communism is not just his division of the world into the categories of the oppressors and the oppressed, as Young notes. Also new, and the basis of his model of propaganda, is his mapping of the "psychological state" of the oppressed. This vision of a synthesis between language and consciousness was an important feature of the Marxist-Leninist linguistic turn and articulated a psychological model of the oppressed that resonates not only in discussions of Muslim communism but also in Marxist models of (post)colonial agency more broadly.

Narimanov provided a memorable example of Muslim communist propaganda in his famous 1925 treatise "Lenin and the East" ("Lenin I vostok"), which honored Lenin's writings on the liberation of the East a year after his death. Indeed, the essay was so popular that it was reprinted in 1970 as a pocket-sized booklet, which is still displayed today in the homes of the last generation of Soviet Azerbaijanis. The essay casts Lenin as both a defender of the oppressed and a prophet. Narimanov recounts the story of an Afghani ambassador—a "mullah" as Narimanov describes him, highlighting his Muslim identity—who, on arriving in Moscow, promptly requests

31. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 175; Anouar Abdel-Malek, *Social Dialectics: Civilizations and Social Theory*, trans. Mike Gonzalez (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981), 84.
32. See Mirsaid Sultan Galiev, "The Methods of Antireligous Propaganda among the Muslims," in *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union*, 148.
33. Sultan Galiev, "The Methods of Antireligous Propaganda among the Muslims," 148.

to see Lenin, that is, his embalmed corpse. When Narimanov asks why, the mullah replies that "his [Lenin's] preaching and his relationship to the oppressed distinguished him clearly among contemporary politicians and leaders of the world. In him I see a prophet [*prorok*]."[34] Narimanov concludes by attributing the liberation of Turkey, Persia, and Afghanistan from European colonialism to Russian revolutionaries under Lenin's leadership.[35] While the essay was written in Russian, it was translated and printed the same year in Azeri, also emphasizing the figure of Lenin as a prophet (*peygəmbər*). The very notion of prophesy itself hinges on the act of the translation and interpretation of divine will. Through his reinvention as a prophet in Narimanov's essay as both a sacred and a secular symbol of Soviet power, Lenin became an iconic figure of both anti-imperial resistance and Soviet imperialism in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Sultan Galiev's plea for new forms of propaganda and Narimanov's description of their success illustrates Muslim communist propaganda's efforts to translate Leninism interlingually, as well as intralingually, through the signification of the mythic quality of Lenin's image. Young also points to a divergence between Soviet anti-imperial Marxism and tricontinental Marxism in the latter's emphasis on the untranslatability of revolutionary practices, resulting in a need for "transculturation."[36] However, the transculturation of Marxist-Leninist theory in the former Russian imperial territories arose out of not only an emphasis on local cultural specificity but also the cotemporaneous development of avant-garde aesthetics. The intralingual character of Muslim communism and its emphasis on the fusion of political subjectivity, cognition, and aesthetics emerged from propaganda efforts and specifically agitprop's synthesis of avant-garde art and politics.

The agitprop efforts on the former imperial periphery were perhaps most influential in the South Caucasus. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the Caspian Sea city of Baku, today the capital of Azerbaijan, had a growing industrial workforce and local intelligentsia.[37] The new wealth flooding to the city from the oil boom funded the creation of

34. Nariman Narimanov, "Lenin i vostok," in *Lenin i vostok* (Baku: Azerbaijanskoe gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1970), 37.
35. Narimanov, "Lenin i vostok," 37.
36. Young appropriates this term from Fernando Ortiz; see Young, *Postcolonialism*, 169.
37. In 1912, the industrial workforce represented 49 percent of the population in Baku, compared to 43 percent of the population in Moscow. See Mark Steinberg, "Russia's *fin de siècle*, 1900–1914," in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 3, *The Twentieth Century*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 83.

a local Turkic press and touring theater troupes. The 1917 revolution also attracted Russian avant-garde artists and politicians to the city, making it an important cultural and economic center for Soviet expansion eastward. Bolshevik politicians began to work with Russian avant-garde artists, as well as local writers and thinkers, drawing on the prerevolutionary cultural infrastructure of theaters and printing presses to launch a Soviet propaganda division. This division, organized through the central Soviet organ of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment, or Narkompros, developed diverse local cultural institutions in Baku, including printing and art studios, theaters, music societies, academic institutions, and cultural journals.[38] These included the official journal of the Baku Narkompros, *Art* (*Iskusstvo*), the Baku division of the Russian telegraph agency charged with designing agitprop posters, a musical academy, and the Agitprop Theater.[39] The group of agitators brought together Russian writers and artists who had participated in the avant-garde circles in Tiflis before the revolution, including Sergei Gorodetsky, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Klebnikov, Vyachislav Ivanov, and Solomon Telingator. Theaters were staffed by members of the touring Russian satirical cabaret revue group the Bat and remaining Red Army soldiers.[40] A select few local artists, composers, and playwrights, including Uzeyir Hajibeyov, Abdurrahim bey Haqverdiev, and Azim Azimzadeh, who had published in the Turkic press and were involved in local theater productions during the prerevolutionary years, also played a significant role in shaping these Soviet cultural institutions.[41]

38. Soviet propaganda in the former imperial space was delegated to Narkompros in 1919.
39. The propaganda posters were produced by the Baku division of the Russian telegraph agency (Bakkavrosta) at the Artistic Union of Baku Workers (Khudozhestvennoe Ob'edinenie Bakinskikh Rabochikh) between 1921 and 1923. The Agitprop Theater, or the State Free Satirical Agitprop Theater/Free Critique–Propaganda Theater (Gosudarstvennyi Svobodnyi Satir-Agit Theatr; Azad Tənqid-Təbliğ Teatrı) opened in 1920 and was renamed the Baku Worker's Theater (Bakinskii rabochii teatr) in 1923.
40. The Bat (La Chauve-Souris) was a touring revue group directed by the Russian-Armenian director and performer Nikita Baileff. It traveled throughout Russia, France, and the United States during the early 1900s.
41. Azim Azimzadeh made his name publishing drawings in the renowned Turkic satirical journal *Molla Nasreddin*, an Azeri-language satirical journal edited by the writer Jalil Mammedquluzadeh. It was published between 1906 and 1917 in Tiflis, in 1921 in Tabriz, and between 1922 and 1931 in Baku. See Əziz Mirəhmədov, *Azərbaycan Molla Nəsrəddini* (Baku: Yazıçı, 1980); Alexandre Bennigsen, "'Molla Nasreddin' et la presse satirique musulmane de Russie avant 1917," *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique* 3, no. 3 (1962): 505–20; Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, *La presse et le mouvement national chez les Musulmans de Russie avant 1920* (Paris: Mouton, 1964).

The early Narkompros propaganda orchestrated a shift in the idea of art and literature as a means for shaping consciousness. This process was facilitated by propaganda strategies, particularly on the imperial periphery, that assembled multilingual and multivocal texts and images. The propaganda's main features in the Caucasus and Central Asia included an attack on Islamic clericalism and the promotion of pan-Turkic and pan-Caucasian symbols as integral features of Soviet culture. Indeed, Muslim communist propaganda drew on Turkic, Caucasian, and Islamic symbols, often conflating the three. Local thinkers and particularly the local press formed cultural ties with a community of Turkic speakers across Central Asia and Turkey. However, Bolshevik politicians threatened by pan-Turkism deemphasized an imagined community of Turkic speakers and instead highlighted the translations of Soviet images and ideals as a point of connection among Muslim and Caucasian supranational communities. Instead of a singular imagined national language community, Soviet agitprop on the imperial periphery envisioned a community through the exchange and interpretation of Marxist-Leninist theory.

Revolutionary culture was indebted to the translation of Marxism-Leninism between the domains of politics and art, legitimating Soviet sovereignty through the articulation of dialectical materialist philosophy.[42] The notion of the Marxist-Leninist linguistic turn does not signal a preference for the linguistic over the visual but rather highlights this new power attributed to aesthetics and philosophy to shape political consciousness. The movement combined diverse cultural and political works—including poetry, prose, theater, film, posters, ethnography, and political speeches—by understanding art as a political act. It encompassed the institutionalization of art as propaganda, as well as a shift in the value of aesthetic form. The formulation of propaganda through a connection to avant-garde art, in turn, revealed the ways art infiltrated daily life. The elision of avant-garde art and politics was understood in revolutionary Russia as a version of Plato's cave myth. In this Leninist vision of Plato, the political or artistic vanguard acts as a messenger, delivering the aesthetic or political truth to the real-world populace, which has gone blind.[43] This fusion, or perhaps confusion,

42. Boris Groys argues that the legitimating force of philosophy in communist leadership accounted for its role as arbiter of theoretical truths, that is, its preeminent duty of constant philosophizing and in particular its application of dialectical materialism. See Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, 33.
43. See Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1–28.

of art and politics, particularly in the domain of propaganda, relied on what scholar Katerina Clark calls "romantic anticapitalism," that is, a quest for an authentic romantic spirit in the face of capitalism's alienation and radical individualism.[44] This model inverted a Marxist-Leninist notion of the primacy of socioeconomic factors in changing society to instead emphasize the central role of romantic spiritual-poetic factors in that political transformation.[45] In this creative configuration, the vanguard then was charged with employing propaganda to interpret spiritual-poetic signs and deliver political truth to the masses.

The creation of a politically engaged artistic vanguard was, however, not the only function of avant-garde art. As Jacques Rancière reminds us in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, the avant-garde establishes a connection between two conceptions of political subjectivity: on the one hand, the archipolitical—or the idea of a party—and its capacity to read the signs of history and, on the other, the metapolitical—or the notion of "global political subjectivity"—and its "aesthetic anticipation of the future . . . [its] invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come."[46] In other words, the idea of an avant-garde is both a strategic and an aesthetic concept that is grounded in a reading of the past but also oriented toward a deliverable future. The agency in this model shifts from the vanguard to the aesthetic conception of the art itself, which generates sensible forms for creating a global political subjectivity. The invention of the sensible in the avant-garde is crucially not only attributed to the material substance of the artwork itself. The politics of the avant-garde instead establishes an important connection between language and the image as sensible forms.

The notion that language could anticipate a community, not only through its function as a sign but also as a sensible form, was most famously championed by the early twentieth-century writings of the Russian cubo-futurists. In particular, Vladimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh's linguistic theory of *zaum*, or the *transrational* word, highlighted the nonrational qualities of language.[47] They envisioned words as (especially aurally and

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44. Clark, *Petersburg*, 17.
45. See Clark, *Petersburg*, 1–28.
46. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2000), 28. According to Rancière, the role of the aesthetic regime of the arts in inventing sensible forms for a future community hinges on Friedrich Schiller's notion of the *aesthetic education of man*, which connected the activity of thought with sensible receptivity as a single reality.
47. Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh developed these ideas in their 1913 manifesto "The Word as Such" ("Slovo kak takovoe").

visually) sensible forms and saw them as capable of structuring feelings and thoughts. In a form of romantic creationism, words were invested with a spiritual power to interpret truth and shape conscious reality.[48] In this way, avant-garde aesthetics served a Marxist-Leninist political messianism by anticipating and animating a future world. Instead of establishing linguistics as a science, the Marxist-Leninist linguistic turn drew on a hermeneutic tradition, defining language through the process of the translation and interpretation of romantic messianic tropes projected toward the construction of a future community.

This vision of aesthetics was also indebted to Soviet linguistic models, which tempered a scientific vision of language by also championing the creative power of the word. Influenced by German romanticism, Soviet linguistics, like avant-garde aesthetics, presented language as both a cultural product and an activity or process through which conscious being is manifested. The early Soviet linguist Gustav Shpet, who worked for the State Academy of the Arts during the first years of Soviet power, was in part responsible for developing a Marxist-inspired linguistic model based on an interpretive philosophy.[49] Shpet's vision of discourse understood the word as a Marxist commodity, a material thing produced by human labor and a social thing charged with creative power. As a meaningful sign, the word also possessed a collective value.[50] In "On the Limits of Scientific Literary Scholarship," Shpet criticizes the objective scientific study of language, situating his own analysis in the domain of signification (semiotics).[51] Shpet

48. See Anindita Banerjee, *We Modern People: Science Fiction and the Making of Russian Modernity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 90–118; and Tomi Huttunen, "Autogenesis in Russian Culture: An Approach to the Avant-garde," in *Understanding Russianness*, ed. Risto Alapuro, Arto Mustajoki, and Pekka Pesonen (New York: Routledge, 2012), 165–82.

49. See Robert Bird, "The Hermeneutic Triangle: Gustav Shpet's Aesthetics in Context," in *Gustav Shpet's Contribution to Philosophy and Cultural Theory*, ed. Galin Tihanov (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press), 28–44.

50. See Michael G. Smith, *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR, 1917–1953* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1998), 59–80.

51. Shpet's argument offers a polemical response to a paper of the same title published by the scholar Boris Isaakovich Iarkho (1889–1942) only a month earlier. Iarkho argued for a positivistic scientific approach to literary study. See Dušan Radunović and Galin Tihanov, "Introduction to Shpet's 'O granitsakh nauchnogo literaturovedeniia' ('On the Limits of Scientific Literary Scholarship')," in *Gustav Shpet's Contribution to Philosophy and Cultural Theory*, 246. Shpet's model also notably diverges from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who developed his scientific view of language in his lectures on linguistics between 1906 and 1911. In particular, Saussure's comparisons between language

articulates this linguistic tension in national terms, writing that "literary consciousness is the cultural self-consciousness of a nation; it surmounts the ethnic diversity of the dialects by creating a common literary language."[52] This common literary language, however, is neither the object of a closed system of scientific study nor defined by a dichotomy between the individual and the nation; instead, it is determined by an open model of cultural exchange and a creative self-consciousness. While Shpet concedes that the study of language in literary scholarship shares "the problem of the philosophy and methodology of scientific knowledge," he argues that language "does not belong among the objects of the natural sciences," as it is "significative, and not perceptive."[53] In Shpet's model, the self-consciousness of a nation expresses the inner psychic experience in the outer expression of linguistic signs, and specifically in the literary community. This vision of language, conceived as both a supranational, creative, social commodity and a collective national cultural product, facilitated the codetermination of avant-garde aesthetics and politics, driven by the creative interpretive power of the word. For Shpet, language provided a medium for conceiving of national culture, a medium not bound by the limits of state property. The nation was understood not only as a structure, as in Benedict Anderson's formulation of Saussurian linguistics, but also as a commodity that acquired meaning through social exchange.[54] In this way, the creative capacity of literary language, placed in an open but no less unequal market of exchange, facilitated Soviet linguistics' ties to an ideology of imperial expansion.

The project to combine linguistics, as a domain of ethnography, with the creative faculties of art and the political force of propaganda was clearly outlined by the Narkompros.[55] The Baku propaganda division's official journal, *Art*, which printed only three issues (all in 1921), was led by the poet Sergei Gorodetsky. While the original designs for the journal included a

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and plants exemplify his reliance on scientific methodology as a basis for his model of language.

52. Gustav Shpet, "On the Limits of Scientific Literary Scholarship" (1924), trans. Dušan Radunović and Galin Tihanov, in *Gustav Shpet's Contribution to Philosophy and Cultural Theory*, 248–49.

53. Shpet, "On the Limits of Scientific Literary Scholarship," 248–49.

54. See Young's discussion of Anderson. Young, *Postcolonialism*, 172.

55. Francine Hirsch defines ethnography (*etnografiia*) as "a broad field of inquiry, which included under its umbrella the disciplines of geography, archaeology, physical anthropology, and linguistics" and which shared similarities with European cultural anthropology. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations*, 63–98.

cosmopolitan assemblage of dual-language texts in Russian and Azeri, the project was realized exclusively in Russian, with only a few cultural features submitted by local authors. Gorodetsky framed the journal's objectives and helped form the Narkompros cultural division in Baku during these early years. In the journal's first issue, he described the aims of the Soviet mission in Baku as equal parts avant-garde art, ethnography, and Soviet politics.

> In this advanced revolutionary stronghold of the East, all of the grand challenges of new art that are set and resolved in Soviet Russia acquire particular significance here in Baku, Azerbaijan. The East, and with it Azerbaijan, still knows the old art forms that have been forgotten in the West. Here the Ashugs still sing; here live musical improvisation has not transcended daily life into ornament. In simple forms, art deeply roots itself in the masses. Artistic instinct is drunk with mother's milk. Carpets, miniatures, maiolica—all that the West admires in its museums in the East is preserved in life. All this creates a fertile ground for the development of art in Baku and in Azerbaijan. . . . The work is not only to implant the techniques of European artistic works here but also to call for a new life for the great art of the East. And if Soviet Russia requires of its artists an enormous charge [*napriazhenie*] of creative forces, then in Azerbaijan this charge should double.[56]

Gorodetsky accords value to Baku not only as the Soviet Orient, a repository for "ancient knowledge," but also as a political capital, a place where challenges are resolved. It is a place that not only preserves the old but also "creates a fertile ground for the development" of a new form of art as propaganda deeply rooted in the evolution of the proletarian masses. Gorodetsky's fusion of propaganda and art lies both in the structure of his comparison and in his discourse of social engineering. Following Gorodetsky's imagery, Soviet avant-garde art and the proletarian masses could be nurtured by the "charge" of creative forces rooted in the "simple forms" of Azerbaijani culture. The discourse of social evolution provides a linkage between the natural artistic instinct, "drunk with mother's milk," and the electrification of Soviet Azerbaijan. The term *napriazhenie* belongs to the same semiotic field as such representations of electricity as *molniia* (lightning) and *razriad* (current or discharge), which were common in avant-

56. Sergei Gorodetsky, "Nashi zadachi," *Iskusstvo* 1 (1921): 5–6.

garde poetry as well as political speeches.[57] During the opening rally of the Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in Baku in 1920, the leader of the Communist International, Karl Radek, described the Soviet frontier in just such terms: "From here will flow an electric current of political awareness."[58] In the domain of avant-garde poetry, the electrical image resonated with several diverse discourses, which particularly among the futurists were signified simultaneously. Electric images recalled the eighteenth-century scientist and philosopher Mikhail Lomonosov's vision of social enlightenment, as well as biblical references to the apocalypse, the mystical realm of necromancy, and Lenin's project to bring power to the Soviet Union.[59] In the context of agitprop, the romantic creationist impulse was connected to the realm of praxis or action. The trope of electricity thus realized the transformation of the spiritual and poetic force of creation into political propaganda.

The program of the Baku Narkompros, outlined in the pages of *Art*, was depicted visually in the Baku propaganda division's posters. The posters were produced by the Bakkavrosta (Baku division of the Russian Telegraph Agency). Under the direction of Russian poets such as Gorodetsky and drawing on the talent of local artists and writers such as Azimzadeh, the posters appropriated the creative efforts of the local intelligentsia and the infrastructure of local printing presses to realize a Soviet project. The posters are united under the Soviet imperial banner printed at the top of each page in Russian and Azeri, which reads, "Proletariats of all countries unite!" The Azeri text emphasizes the gathering of the world's dutiful workers "bütün cehan faqra kasabası toplaşık." The term *kasab*, as Sultan Galiev glosses, is one of the important teachings of Islam: "the duty to engage in trade and to work." Sultan Galiev outlines this Islamic duty to work and "the absence of private property in lands, waters, and forests" as cultural commandments that would facilitate Bolshevik antireligious propaganda in the Muslim territories.[60] Drawing on Sultan Galiev's designs for Muslim communist propaganda, the posters promote the figure of the Muslim communist as an avant-garde hero, uniting all countries through a universally understandable community of words, images, and ethical principles.

The subject of heroism, which played a major role in nineteenth-

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57. For a discussion of the trope of electrification in Russian literature, see Banerjee, *We Modern People*, 90–118.
58. For Radek's speech, see Riddell, *To See the Dawn*, 59.
59. See Banerjee, *We Modern People*, 110.
60. See Sultan Galiev, "The Methods of Antireligous Propaganda among the Muslims," 146.

century Russian orientalist representations of the Caucasus, as well as in Turkic folk literature, defines the strategic and aesthetic avant-garde paradigm in the Baku agitprop posters. Drawing on a romantic image of a revolutionary Caucasian hero, as well as a Turkic folk hero, or *yiğit*, the posters envision Muslim communist solidarity, appealing for the unification of these supranational worlds under the Soviet imperial banner. The simultaneous rejection of and fascination with the romantic poets of the nineteenth century was a common trope in twentieth-century avant-garde poetry.[61] References to canonical works of Russian romantic poetry set in the Caucasus thus helped formulate the image of a revolutionary Soviet figure. The image of the hero in the posters recalls the mounted Caucasian hero in the works of Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov. Such prose and verse, written during the writers' political exile under Nicholas I, amid Russian imperial expansion in the Caucasus, derive their vision of heroism from its antiauthoritarian politics. The freedom-loving Caucasian fighter, identified by his horsemanship and curved dagger (*kinzhal*), highlights the Russian intelligentsia's critique of tsarist autocracy.[62] Placed in the context of the Soviet expansion east, the orientalist hero, somewhat paradoxically, unites Muslim communists in a fight against the imperialist discourse that produced that expansion less than a century earlier. The evocation of Russian orientalist imagery also notably conflates the imagined space of the North Caucasus as a site of Islamic rebellion described in Pushkin's and Lermontov's poetry with the posters' South Caucasian turkophone addressee. Through these conflations of geography, the posters aim to unify Muslim communist consciousness in a call for Soviet expansion. However, the posters appealed not only to an elite community of readers of Russian poetry but also to the peasant masses, who would have recognized the horseman with a curved dagger as a *yiğit*. In the correspondence of text and image, the posters employ an avant-garde repetition of romantic tropes to adapt bourgeois culture to the proletarian image.

The first poster reproduced here (Figure 1), which was printed in

61. The futurist manifesto "Slap in the Face of Public Taste" ("Poschechina obschestvennomu vkusu") famously demanded that the Russian canon of poets, including Aleksandr Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and Lev Tolstoy, be thrown off the "steamship of contemporaneity" (s parokhoda sovremennosti). David Burliuk, Aleksandr Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Viktor Khlebnikov, "Poschechina obschestvennomu vkusu," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 12 tomakh*, by Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky (Moscow: Khudozh. lit., 1939–49), 1:402–3.

62. I discuss this further in Feldman, "Orientalism on the Threshold: Reorienting Heroism in Late Imperial Russia," *boundary 2* 39, no. 2 (2012): 161–80.

Figure 1. "Life was Slow in the East" (Byla medlitel'na zhizn' na Vostoke). Image courtesy of the Mardjani Foundation.

Baku in 1920, depicts a mounted hero racing into battle against Western imperialism to liberate the East. The dual-language caption reads:

RUSSIAN:
Life was slow in the East,
Crushed by a millennium of oppression.
The bourgeoisie hid in the book of the prophet.
They deceived the humiliated nation [*narod*].

But the time has come, the light is shining.
The five-pointed star
Brings forth the valiant horseman
To freedom with the battle song.

AZERI:
For a long time the eastern world has been sleeping,
Groaning under oppression,
By the lying words of the mullahs,
The poor people were deceived.

Now the time has come when the light will shine.
The star of truth is born and has begun to shine.
The hero rides to freedom on his horse.
He cries out in challenge.

The people of the East slowly wake up,
Hit, crush, cut, and kill the oppressor.
The oppressed, lined up like kebab pieces,
Are saved from [their] chains of fear.

The first lines of the Russian caption recall Lermontov's famous 1841 poem "The Argument" ("Spor"), which depicts two mountains in the Caucasus—Kazbek and Elbrus—debating the future of the East. Lermontov writes, "I don't fear the East, / Answered Kazbek, / There the race of men has slept deeply, / Already for nine centuries."[63] Lermontov here describes an orientalist vision of the soporific effect of the conversion to Islam after the Arab conquest of the Caucasus, which began in the seventh century.[64] The final stanza of the Azeri text provides a violent image of awakening.

63. Mikhail Iur'evich Lermontov, "Spor," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 5 tomakh* (Leningrad: Academia Nauk, 1935–37), 2:123.
64. Varying dates are given for conversion, ranging from the eighth through the tenth centuries. However, conversion was not an event, but rather a process that unfolded
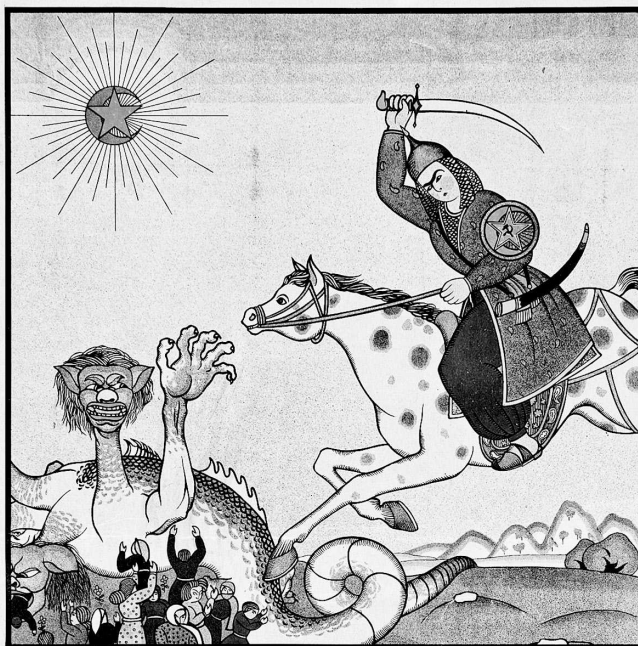
The interplay between the Russian and Azeri texts exposes the transformation of a class critique into a denunciation of the power of the corrupt religious elite. The third line of the Russian text accuses the bourgeoisie of concealing itself in the "book of the prophet." Here the poster alludes to alliances between the Russian imperial administration and Islamic authorities, a strategy used during the civil war. The third line of the Azeri text, however, more pointedly accuses the mullahs of deceiving the poor with their "lying words." The ambiguity of this attack on the figure of the mullah in the Azeri text, compared to that on the corrupt "book of the prophet" in the Russian, obscures the distance between a Bolshevik critique of the deceptive forces of religion and the popular Muslim reformist denunciation of the corruption of Islamic institutions.

The first poster's violent revolutionary charge locates the liberated Muslim people beneath the hero's red flag, associating this symbol with a form of communal, spiritual Muslim identity. The quest for "the star of truth" becomes the rallying cry for freedom from religious corruption and, in turn, an icon for Muslim communism. The flag and the star are echoed in the second poster, also printed in Baku in 1920, which depicts a rider on a white horse charging into battle against the dragon of capitalism (Figure 2). The sandy pyramids in the background evoke Egypt's 1919 independence from Britain. Liberating the Islamic East from the clutches of capitalist world imperialism, the Bolshevik Muslim hero races toward a global horizon of revolutionary politics. The poster notably connects Muslim communism to a transnational anti-imperial crusade. The critique of the corrupt mullahs thus transcends the space of the Caucasus, calling to Islamic societies on the Soviet horizon. The speeding horse contrasts the allusion to Lermontov's poem about the stagnancy of the East, seeming to overcome the orientalist gesture while extolling a new essentialist image of the Muslim hero as the symbol of future progress and speed. Unlike Russian avant-garde images and poetry, this image is devoid of any references to technology. The poster's avant-garde character is instead captured in its vision of the horizon as a space in which the anti-imperialist revolutionary image paradoxically serves Soviet imperial expansion. The images and the assemblage of Turkic and Russian text in this way generate sensible forms for the creation of a Soviet Muslim revolutionary and the idea of a Muslim communist future.

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between the eighth and nineteenth centuries. See Ira Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 48.

Figure 2. "The sun is hot and the horse—tired" (zharko solntse I kon' izmuchen). Image courtesy of the Mardjani Foundation.

The poster (Figure 2), also printed in Baku in 1920, depicts a rider mounted on a white horse launching into battle against the dragon of capitalism. The caption, also printed in Russian and Azeri, reads:

RUSSIAN:
The sun is hot and the horse—tired.
He cannot find rest anywhere.
Ah, the ravines, hills, and cliffs,
The dazzling path to the star.

Let him hiss with his contorted face.
We overturned the dragon.
Inevitable, calm, and firm,
We rally under the red banner.

Oh comrades, gather close together,
Under the sign of the red star.
The worker-knight [*rabochii vitiaz'*] destroys
The crimes of the unclean horde [*pogannoi ordy*].

AZERI:
Neither the warmth of the sun nor the horse's fatigue
Could keep him from his true road [*haqq yolunun*]!
Mountains and rocks break apart from the road.
The young hero [*yiğit*] cannot stray from his goal.

Even if a dragon is overturned,
What does vanquishing him do?!
Poor brothers, go demand more.
Gather under the red flag.

Companions, gather in love!
Under the light [*nur*] of the red star.
Don't wait for Izrafil's trumpet.
Come beneath the trumpet of freedom!!

While the poster remains unsigned, it is likely that it was designed by Azimzadeh, perhaps with the help of Gorodetsky.[65] The figure of the mounted *yiğit* evokes two popular figures in the Caucasus, Saint George, from the Orthodox Christian tradition, and al-Khidr, from the Muslim tradition. The

65. This poster shares a stylistic interest in Persian miniatures, for which Azimzadeh was known.

poster's imagery addresses a pan-Caucasian cultural community, while its Turkic text and folk subtext instead emphasize a pan-Turkic linguistic community. The story of Saint George slaying the dragon, which dates to the tenth or eleventh centuries in modern Turkey and Georgia, recounted an act of heroism in the name of Christianity. George, in this way, serves as the protector of Eurasian Christian civilization against the dragon, which is described in the final line of the Russian text as the "unclean horde" (*pogannoi ordy*), recalling orientalist descriptions of Russian Muslims as Mongol invaders.[66] In the Ottoman and Persian empires, Saint George was also often imagined as al-Khidr. In numerous Turkic folk stories, al-Khidr helps the Sufi hero Sari Saltuk defeat a seven-headed dragon, to which the multiheaded dragon in the image alludes. Across the Islamic world, al-Khidr is pictured with a staff, an analog to the hero's blade, and is standing on a fish, which could be associated with a form of sea dragon as the dragon is here depicted with a fin.[67] Saint George and al-Khidr are often signaled simultaneously and interchangeably in heterodox spaces such as the Caucasus. One of the most intriguing modern examples of this doubled signification occurs in the Armenian Soviet director Sergei Parajanov's film *Ashik Kerib* (1988), in which the hero is aided by the magical transportive powers of al-Khidr while he travels in the Persian Empire and is welcomed with the icon of Saint George on his arrival in Georgia. The reference to al-Khidr emphasizes the hero's connection to immortality. Al-Khidr, the green one, has drunk from the water of life and thus enables the Soviet *yiğit*'s quest to transcend the limits of historical time.

The dual-language text of the posters describes a hero's journey to his goal of vanquishing the dragon and uniting the people under the Soviet star. In this way, the narrative of the valiant hero functions as a metaphor for the Soviet agitprop project. The Azeri text further emphasizes the connection between Soviet power and the spiritual realm. In place of the star, in the second line of the text the hero seeks his "true road" (*haqq yolunun*), drawing on the connotations of the term *haqq* as spiritual truth. In the final stanza, the people are directed to "gather in love! / Under the light

66. Indeed, this image was used in other political propaganda. For example, Leon Trotsky was depicted as Saint George fighting the dragon of counterrevolution.
67. It is noteworthy that the Christian imagery of order battling chaos is taken somewhat differently in a Sufi nondualist tradition. Al-Khidr's prominence in Sufi thought reflects the notion of chaos and order as coexistent forces, as illustrated in representations of al-Khidr balancing on the back of a fish. Thus, the evocation of al-Khidr here might not carry the same emphasis on the force of destruction.

[*nur*] of the red star." *Nur* also belongs to the linguistic register of divine truth. Finally, instead of casting the hero as a protector against the "unclean horde," the Azeri text calls to Muslims to unite under the trumpet of freedom and ignore Izrafil's horn, a reference to the sign of the apocalypse. One of the four archangels in the Qur'an, Izrafil signals the Day of Resurrection. The revolution is thus anticipated in the path of the immortal Muslim communist *yiğit*. His quest promises, through the language of apocalypse and resurrection, the construction of a new Soviet frontier as the divine light of truth.

Building on the folk figure of the *yiğit*, as well as on the spiritual registers of divine truth and messianic destiny, the posters draw on the supranational value of these cultural symbols. Recalling Russian orientalist depictions of "Caucasian" heroism, they reimagine nineteenth-century poetic tropes as the sensible forms of a revolutionary Soviet future. The aesthetic design of the images—including the use of bright colors, contoured line, three-quarter view, and the representation of a stylized rounded "Asian" face—evokes the style of Persian miniatures. Read as translations, the Russian and Azeri texts offer a paradoxical juxtaposition of a warrior vanquishing an "unclean horde" with its attendant politics of xenophobic Russian imperialism against the notion of the Soviet flag as the icon of Islamic truth. Though the *yiğit* as a folk figure envisions a supranational Turkic community and the evocation of Saint George and al-Khidr a heterodox Caucasian one, the posters locate their images in the secular national context of Muslim communism.

The triumph of the hero is realized in the call to the avant-garde artists and politicians to translate communism and in so doing create a new form of Soviet Muslim civic and cultural identity. The Narkompros's aesthetic-political project to create Muslim communist agitprop reveals a more fundamental shift in the role of language and aesthetics in political life. This Marxist-Leninist linguistic turn authorizes a theoretical bond between political subjectivity, cognition, and aesthetics, which exposes the connection between orientalism and anti-imperial politics in the formation of an idea of (post)colonial literature. As the case of the South Caucasus illustrates, the expansion of the Soviet empire simultaneously with the formation of anti-imperial politics necessitates the bracketing of (post)coloniality as a process of Russian decolonization, which occurred simultaneously with the process of Soviet recolonization. Similarly reflexive and relational, the paradigm of the translation of Muslim communism negotiates the space between Soviet hegemony and a short-lived, yet foundational

national Bolshevik campaign led by Sultan Galiev and Nariman Narima-
nov. The creation of a community from the sensible forms of this avant-
garde agitprop project imagined a politically militant form of Muslim identity
through the translation of a canon of revolutionary aesthetics and spiritual
imagery. As the epigraph suggests, the Bolshevik revolution was translated
as an originary struggle, as "the first genuine holy war" against imperial-
ism. Muslim communism not only anticipated the expansion of the Soviet
empire but also contributed to the architecture of a cognitive aesthetics of
Muslim Soviet anti-imperial identity. In so doing, it legitimated both Soviet
sovereignty and anti-imperial resistance through a paradoxical form of
(post)colonial agency.