

LETTER FROM SOVIET UZBEKISTAN BY STEPHEN HANDELMAN



A young man in trousers and open-necked shirt walks across the sunny courtyard of a sixteenth-century Muslim seminary.

Stopping just beyond the volleyball net and the hanging lines of student laundry, he positions himself in the direction of Mecca, raises his hands, palms facing inwards, and begins to chant the afternoon prayer. Standing in the shade are two young Soviet Red Army officers, looking on with friendly curiosity.

A few years ago, such a scene would have been hard to imagine in the Soviet Union. The peaceful tableau in the Mir-Arab *medresse* (school) of Bukhara in Soviet Uzbekistan, with the Red Army men present as mere tourists, ought to be the perfect symbol of the new liberal age of Gorbachev. All the same, the scene contains other, darker, implications.

If Communist power and Islam have reached a kind of truce after some seventy years of open hostility, it is not out of any particular humanitarian impulse. By displaying greater tolerance for Muslim sensitivities, Moscow is playing practical politics. At current birth rates in Central Asia, by the year 2000 one in every three Soviet citizens will be of Muslim origin. Ethnic assertiveness and the revival of religious fervour already represent a potential for trouble that would make the current unrest in the Baltics and Caucasus look tame. It is reasonable to assume that one factor in Gorbachev's refusal to grant many of the most radical demands of Estonians, Armenians and their comrades-in-spirit is the explosive effect such a decision would have on the peoples and nationalities in the most unasimilated part of the Soviet empire.

Even a brief journey across the flat, arid plain that stretches from the Aral Sea to the mountains of Afghanistan turns up horrified comments from the local officials about what would happen if things

were allowed to get as far as they have in Tallinn and Yerevan. Not surprisingly, political leaders in this part of the country were among the most vociferous opponents of Baltic nationalism when new amendments to the Soviet constitution were debated last November.

"We just don't need that sort of thing here," Alla Lavrushko, third secretary in charge of ideology at the Samarkand communist party

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headquarters, told me one afternoon during what became a tense encounter at her office. Lavrushko was referring to popular fronts, unofficial groups and the panoply of new political structures which have been allowed to flourish in other parts of the country. Lavrushko, an ambitious young woman assigned here three years ago from Moscow, was evidently responding to signals very different from the ones most Western observers have been getting from the Kremlin. While the Gorbachev reform group outlines far-reaching plans for democratic elections this spring, Moscow's representatives in Central Asia know their job is to prevent democracy from getting out of hand.

After agreeing to meet with a few Western journalists, she appeared to regret it five minutes into the conversation. Our first question cut short what was about to be a long paean to the region's cultural and economic achievements. "How have you begun preparing for the new election

law?" We asked. "Will there be several candidates nominated?"

"Why do you ask that?" she responded suspiciously.

"Because that's what Mr. Gorbachev said was going to happen."

"Why should there be two candidates for the same post – the best person will always be chosen anyway," came the snappish reply.

"Okay, what about popular fronts?"

"What about them?"

"We've heard one has been formed here – are you supporting it, as party officials are doing in Estonia?"

"You have been misinformed," said Lavrushko.

It seemed futile to go on. Lavrushko is not to be blamed for her testiness. In this part of the world, idealistic notions of greater democracy have to be balanced with local realities, and Moscow is very far away.

The ancient cities of Bukhara and Samarkand still operate according to political imperatives much older than those brought by the Soviet revolution. In a region whose leaders until recently ran fiefdoms oiled by family ties and widespread bribery, the heritage of Alexander the Great and Tamburlaine seems more relevant than that of Lenin. In the *chai-khanas* (tea houses) of Bukhara local merchants and political bosses, wreathed in the smoke from shashlik broiling on open stoves, intrigue and gossip as they have for centuries. The ferocious-looking men with drooping moustaches who stalk the streets in quilted coats could have come straight out of the Bible. It is no surprise to learn that ethnic consciousness is alive and growing.

Local newspapers have started to publish complaints about early Bolshevik and Stalinist policies

which disrupted tribal and clan ties in the region. Under *glasnost*, long-buried language and territorial problems have emerged as a source of ethnic friction. Tadjhiks recall that they were forced to change their alphabet from Arabic to Latin script and then to Cyrillic. "Now some of our young people cannot read the inscriptions on their grandparents' graves," wrote one young student.

Another factor in the discontent is Moscow's recent attempt to clean up political corruption in Central Asia. Some of the most important figures in Uzbekistan are now facing charges in connection with an eight billion dollar scandal involving the falsification of cotton production figures. The sensational coverage of the affair in the Moscow press has angered Uzbeks and Tadjhiks alike. They detect in the tones of official self-righteousness a hint of racism and paternalism.

Which brings us back to religion. One recent article by a communist party member noted with alarm the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Young men were refusing to take the oath of military service, and babies were being given the name of "Ayatollah," he claimed.

At the Mir-Arab *medresse*, the Soviet Union's only Muslim school, hundreds of applications for the eighty available spots are arriving monthly. Abdurachim Tadjekmatov, the school's deputy director, offers one reason for the Islamic revival that is sure to disturb loyal *apparatchiks* like Alla Lavrushko. "There's no doubt that more young people are turning back to religion because they just don't believe in the communist party," he said. "They feel betrayed by our leaders." Indeed, the afternoon prayers in Bukhara contain an ominous message for Moscow itself. □

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