THE TURKS OF RUSSIA

By MEDINA SELIHMET

The word "Turks" is commonly used only for the inhabitants of Turkey. However it also possesses a much wider sense in which it includes those peoples in western, central, and northeastern Asia who speak closely related dialects of the Turkic languages, belong to the Mohammedan faith, and are strongly influenced by Arabic-European civilization. In the following article the noun "Turk" will be used in this wider sense together with the adjective "Turkic." For the inhabitants of Turkey the term "Turks of Turkey" will be employed together with the adjective "Turkish."

Apart from the Turks of Turkey, the tribes of Chinese Turkestan, the Yakuts of northeastern Siberia, and some scattered groups in the Balkan peninsula and Iran, all Turks today live within the boundaries of the USSR. They include the following main groups: the Tartars of the Volga and the Bashkirs of the Ural's, both combined under the newly created term Idel-Ural (Idel is the Turkic word for Volga); the Tartars of the Crimea; the Azerbaidjanians of Transcaucasia; and the Kazaks, Kirghiz, Turkmens, and Uzbeks of Central Asia. They inhabit a practically closed block of roughly a million and a half square miles, that is an area as large as continental Europe without Russia and the Balkan peninsula. The inclusion of Yakutia would add another 1,200,000 square miles.

The figures for the Turks living within the USSR are very much in dispute: it is in the interest of the Russians and Soviets to minimize the numbers of Turks in their country, while the Turks in their turn want to prove as many as possible. Since the difficulties for a reliable census of nationalities are so great, we must confine ourselves to the statement that the figures vary between 15 and 40 millions.

Medina Selihmet is by birth a daughter of a Tartar Muslim family in Ufa in the Ural's and was brought up in the spirit of the growing Turkic nationalism to which her family, in common with most educated Turks, belonged. She went to school in Ufa and St. Petersburg until the waves of the revolution carried her to the Far East, where she married a Tartar. She has always been active among the numerous Turks in the Far East, working with her countrywomen, lecturing, and writing for the Mudlen magazine of the Idel-Ural people. She has been living in Shanghai since 1933, and is the vice-president of the "Society of Collaboration of the Peoples of the Caucasus, Idel-Ural, and the Ukraine."—K.M.

TURKS AND RUSSIANS

Some 40 million Turks live within the borders of the Soviet Union. It was against their will that they were incorporated into the Russian empire during the last few centuries, and they have never ceased to long for their freedom. The present war between Germany and the USSR has given new impetus to their hope for liberation and for the establishment of independent states in the areas inhabited by them.

To most people, even those who are regular readers of newspapers and magazines, it will come as a surprise when we speak of a Turkic problem in the USSR. Russia, the link between Europe and the Turkic peoples, has purposely prevented the world from having any knowledge about this question, and has done her utmost to make
it seem unimportant and unworthy of consideration. In order to eliminate forever the danger of an organized Turkic population, the Russians employed the ancient policy of "divide and rule." They cultivated every antagonism among the Turks and tried to convince them that a Turkic question did not exist. They had good reason for this policy, for the Turkic issue is of vital interest for Russia.

The Turks themselves must bear part of the blame for the world's ignorance of them and their problems. In irreconcilable hostility toward the Russians, the Turks fenced themselves off from the rest of the world, became egocentric and provincial, they "stewed in their own juice" and lived under the influence of outworn conceptions which had lost their meaning long ago. This was the case, at any rate, up to the second half of the nineteenth century. At that time a decisive change took place. The Turkic leaders were stirred by a new interest in the world beyond the Russian borders, whence a breath of fresh air was blowing into their own stuffiness. Their eyes were opened, their national consciousness awoke, and an active struggle for independence took the place of passive resistance.

WHERE DO THE TURKS COME FROM?

Legend has it that the Turks originated in the Orkhon country south of Lake Baikal. Their home for thousands of years can be approximately defined by the following line: from the hills of the Khingan in the Far East to the basin of Lake Baikal, along the snow-capped giants of the Altai through Tarbagatay and the Ural mountains down the Idel (Volga) river, to the Caspian Sea and eastward along the Tien Shan and Karakorum mountains back to the Khingan. This was the home of great tribes of the past, the Alans, Avars, Huns, Scythians, Pechenegs, Komans, and Seldjuks, as well as of many Turkic tribes existing to this day, among them the Yakuts of eastern Siberia, the Uzbeks and Kirghiz of Central Asia, the Tartars and Bashkirs of Russia, and, of course, the Turks of Turkey.

The earliest reference to a Turkic tribe is probably the mention of the Hiung-Nu people in the Chinese Annals (about 2000 B.C.), and the first mention of the name "Turk" is to be found in Byzantine, Persian, and Chinese sources. Zemorevos, sent by the Emperor Justinian to the Altai in 568 A.D., refers to them as Turks, and in Arab sources of this period the same name can be found. In the oldest written alphabet, invented by the Turks, and in a language understandable to all Turks, ancient writings praise the deeds of Bilge Khan whom they call the Khan of the Turks, and they include a prayer to God that he may allow the Turks to live forever.

Compared with that of other great human races, the history of the Turks has been given little attention, and no agreement as to their racial affiliations has as yet been reached. As a Turk, the author prefers to accept the result of recent Turkic investigations which maintain that the Turkic people are a race of their own, although in regions bordering upon the Mongols and Ugro-Finns they are mixed with these peoples. This latter fact can be noticed particularly in the case of the Kirghiz, the Kazaks, and part of the Bashkirs.

SONS OF THE STEPPE

It is commonly accepted that environment played an important role in the history of any nation. In no other case, perhaps, did environment play so paramount a role as in the historical development of the Turks. At the foot of the giant mountain ranges begin the endless steppes, stretching thousands of miles in every direction. Then comes the region of the dead sands, the "hunger steppes," where hardly anything grows, and then more steppes, cut from time to time by the blossoming valleys of the rivers. These valleys and their fertile soil reward the labor of men a hundredfold. They caused
people to settle, to work, and to create civilizations. The steppes, on the other hand, were the ideal ground for cattle-breeding. Man moved with his herds into the steppe, and the steppe, like an ocean, carried him on its waves. The steppe created nomads. There were times when violent storms from the tribes have proved that the Turks have at different times developed a high civilization of their own. Cultural treasures fit to stand side by side with those of other ancient civilizations have been brought to light from the enveloping cloak of the wandering sands. The myth that the Turks received their
civilization from outside, particularly from the Arabs together with Islam, is gradually being broken down. It appears that the Arab conquerors themselves were greatly astonished at the high degree of culture reached by the Turks.

Islam, of course, exercised a profound influence on the life of the Turks and

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**TURKIC TRADITIONS**

Excavations carried out by archeologists in regions inhabited by Turkic
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united them spiritually. However, Turkic genius may claim a lion’s share in the progress of science and enlightenment which took place after the Islam victory, and in the development of Islam culture. The philosopher Ibni Sina, the Aristotle of Islam, and that other leading Moslem philosopher, Farabi, were Turks. Many intellectual and spiritual leaders were given to the Islam world by the Turks from earliest times up to this day. But, since they wrote in the language of the Koran, that is in Arabic, they were wrongly considered to be Arabs. When the Turks accepted Islam they also accepted the Arabic alphabet, although they already possessed their own system of writing. The ancient Orkhon monument shows that the latter consisted of thirty-eight characters. From the seventh century A.D. the Turks had been using the Uigur alphabet, which, in spite of the coming of Islam, remained in use up to the fifteenth century.

The most brilliant period in Turkic art was the Middle Ages, from which magnificent masterpieces have come down to us. They have been especially well preserved in Turkestan from the days of the great Tamerlane and his successors. Mosques, religious schools, astronomical observatories, mausoleums, monuments of all kinds, tombstones—all these beautiful examples of medieval architecture are the work of Turkic genius. Great achievements were also accomplished in the fields of science and literature. In the neighborhood of Samarkand a famous observatory has been discovered where the outstanding astronomer Ulug-Bek, the son of Tamerlane, for many years carried out his observations. His star tables, as we now know, were more exact than those worked out by European astronomers a century after his death. He was the first to prove the sphericity of the earth and its movement around the sun, while Europe was still under the influence of Ptolemy. It is from memories like these that the Turks draw the strength and determination for their struggle for freedom.

THE TARTARS

The basin of the river Volga (or Idel) became in its central and lower reaches the habitation of Turkic people several centuries before Christ. Khanates (Khan-states) were formed there under various names. Among the first to arrive were the Turkic Bulgars, whose name is probably related to that of the river Volga. One branch of this tribe later migrated to the Balkan peninsula, mixing with peoples of Slavic origin and settling in the territory now known as Bulgaria. The other, moving north along the Idel and ousting the Finns living there, established the powerful Bolgar Khanate. Later, in the lower reaches of the Idel, there existed the rich Khazar Khanate. In the thirteenth century the Mongol invasion led to the formation of the Golden Horde as the westernmost part of the mighty empire of Genghis Khan and his successors. The members of the Golden Horde became known in Russia and Europe as Tartars. They were predominantly of Turkic rather than Mongol stock; for the farther west the armies of Genghis Khan moved the smaller became the percentage of Mongols in their ranks.

When the Golden Horde disintegrated, three Tartar Khanates emerged in its place, two on the Idel—the Kazan and the Astrakhan Khanates—and one in the Crimea and the steppes to the north of it. The Khanate of Kazan was the most important of the three, with rich agricultural soil and fat pastures for cattle, linked by the far-flung system of the Idel with Moscovy to the west and Central Asia to the south. Kazan itself became a commercial and cultural center.

THE RISE OF MOSCOVY

But rising Moscovy, after fighting in the course of a century twenty-five campaigns against the Khanate, in 1552 conquered Kazan under Ivan the Terrible. A few years later the Astrakhan Khanate also ceased to exist. Only the Crimea held out for another two centuries. The entire
course of the Idel was in Russian hands. Moscovy immediately began to colonize, to Russianize, and to Christianize the newly won lands. Russian peasants were settled on Tartar lands, mosques were closed and destroyed, and Russian churches and monasteries erected.

The Tartars’ answer was in the form of frequent rebellions and uprisings. Every internal disturbance in Russia was used by the Tartars for their attempts to win back their freedom. When Moscovy passed through her “Troubled Times,” between her first and second dynasties, the Tartars allied themselves with the Poles; during the rising of Stenka Razin the Tartars took his side; and joining the rebellious Pugatchov in the civil war against Moscovy they made yet another attempt at independence.

Under such conditions of continuous struggle there could be no question of a normal cultural and economic development. Not until the end of the eighteenth century did the contest become less fierce. Moscow tried to compromise. Schools were built, and in 1799 permission for the printing of religious books was given. The economic life of the country improved. Factories were erected, and commercial relations taken up with Central Asia and China. The subsequent quick rise of Kazan alarmed the Russian Government, and the further building of new factories, the founding of credit associations, and many other things were prohibited. Everything was done to increase the importance of Moscow as a commercial and industrial center at the expense of Kazan. Draconian measures were introduced against the cultural and spiritual development of the Tartars.

**CONQUEST OF TURKESTAN**

The conquest of the Idel Tartars opened the road to the east for the Russians. Early in the eighteenth century they won control over the steppes of northern Turkestan, inhabited by the Turkic Kirghiz. Next they turned against the Caucasus, where the Christian Grusians (or Georgians) had asked the Russians for aid against their Mohammedan neighbors Turkey and Persia. The Russians came, and soon transformed Georgia into an outpost of their imperialism. The Turkic tribes of the Caucasus, under their great leader Shamyl, for many decades offered heroic resistance, but in the end the Caucasus and the regions to the south of it inhabited by the Azerbaidjan Turks became part of Russia. The stage was set for the final scene of the Turkic tragedy, the conquest of Turkestan, which began in 1864 and ended in 1883 with the complete subjugation of western Turkestan as far as the great mountain wall of Central Asia.

**NATIONAL REBIRTH**

The conquest of Turkestan, center of their culture and historical tradition, was a terrible blow for the Turks. It disclosed the weakest point of the Turkic nation: their stagnation and backwardness. The Turkic leaders began to realize that their fanatical hostility towards everything non-Moslem had made the assimilation of western culture and civilization impossible. New roads were sought for and a new ideal was born: orientation towards Europe. It now became necessary to carry on a struggle among their own people in order to prepare the ground for these new ideas.

One of the outstanding men who decisively turned the trend of Turkic cultural life towards Europe was Shigabetdin Merdjani (1815-1889). With tremendous energy he fought against religious fanaticism and the seclusion of women. He was the first to teach European sciences in his school and to insist on the study of the Turkic language and Turkic history in addition to the hitherto exclusive interest in things Islamic. The linguist Kayum Nassyri was another leader of Turkic nationalism. Fully aware of the enormous importance of the written word,
he struggled for permission to publish a newspaper, which was constantly refused. Finally he was allowed to print a calendar, which he turned into an effective political publication.

In the field of education and schools the outstanding leader was the Crimean Ismail Bey Gasprali (1853-1914). After finishing military school in Moscow, Gasprali spent much time abroad, particularly in Turkey, where at that time the spirit of modernization was strong. Returning to the Crimea, Gasprali worked as a teacher and compiled the first textbook in Arabic letters based on a phonetic system. He did his utmost to develop the school system as the most important instrument for bringing new ideas into the minds of his countrymen. His newspaper Tardjman, which he was finally allowed to publish in 1883, greatly aided him in his endeavors. In it he fought against the dusty and out-of-date school methods of the past and for his political and social ideas. His battle cry was: "One ideal, one endeavor, and one language for all Turks."

THE FEMININE QUESTION

The Bolsheviks have for many years loudly proclaimed—and many people abroad have taken this at its face value—that the Turkic woman owes her liberation from seclusion entirely to the Bolsheviks. In reality, however, the fight against the enslavement of women began in the second half of the nineteenth century in connection with the general awakening of the Turks. It made its first appearance in Idel-Ural and the Crimea, and among its most energetic leaders were Merdjanli and Gasprali. In this struggle, modern literature played a powerful part, novels, magazines, and newspapers all participating in it. The representatives of Islam had also shown increasing understanding for its necessity. The emancipated Turkic women turned eagerly towards education and by the time the Bolshevist revolution broke out their cultural level had already been raised considerably. Among them were women with the highest education, such as physicians and university professors, and there were many with a good average education. There were journalists, authors, social workers, teachers, librarians, and many other professions in which women were building their place in society.

The emancipation of women in the advanced parts of the Turkic nation exercised its influence also on the more remote regions. Everywhere the development was clearly in the direction of a complete liberation. It was at this stage that the Bolshevist revolution broke out, and the Bolsheviks have since taken credit for and used for their own purposes a development which was already well under way before they came into power.

THE TURKS AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONS

After the Russian revolution of 1905, feverish activity set in in the field of magazines and newspapers. From the very first meeting of the Russian Parliament (Duma) the representatives of the Turkic peoples always acted in unison. This caused the Tsarist Government to reduce the number of Turkic delegates from forty to seven, while Turkestan was entirely deprived of its right to vote. The reactionary policy following the brief liberal era of 1905-1907 resulted in new pressure being exerted on the Turkic tribes; but it could not stop the process of a rebirth which had already set in.

The outbreak of the Great War was welcomed by the Turks as a possible chance for the solution of their national problems. A "Committee for the Protection of Rights of the Enslaved Turkic-Tartarian Moslems of Russia" was formed abroad under the leadership of Yussuf Akchura. Akchura, after receiving part of his education in Turkey, had become one of the founders of Turkism, the ideology which advocates the unity of all Turks. His committee included Turks from the Idel, the Caucasus, Turkestan, and the
Crimea. Its members tried to arouse interest in the fate of the Russian Turks through lectures in various European cities and through the publication of a memorandum describing the methods used by the Russians against the Turks and Moslems. In 1916 the Turks under Aketchura participated side by side with Ukrainians and other nationalities in the "Congress of Nations" held at Lausanne, Switzerland. They asked the world to assist them in their struggle for liberation from Russian control. Meanwhile a bloody rebellion against Russian rule broke out among the Kirghiz, Kazaks, and Uzbeks.

After the liberal revolution in the spring of 1917 the Russian Turks were among the first to organize and to act as a unit. An "All-Russian Moslem Revolutionary Office" was formed which convoked a Moslem congress in Moscow. Among the 970 delegates were members of all the Turkic tribes of Russia and even Eastern Turkestan. It was planned to convocate similar congresses in the various parts of the Turkic world, but this program was upset by the general political chaos which developed in Russia.

THE BOLSHEVIST VICTORY

The Bolshevist revolution of October/November 1917 found the Turks of Russia in the midst of serious attempts to form states of their own. As their organization had not yet been completed, the Turkic peoples were not ready to defend themselves successfully against the flood of Bolshevism. They were overwhelmed, although in some regions—particularly in Turkestan—only after long and bitter fighting. On encountering such strong resistance the Bolshevists decided to compromise and organized so-called "national republics." However, in order to prevent any unity among the Turks, they artificially divided them into a great number of "nationalities." The scissors of the Bolshevist Government craftily cut the territory inhabited by Turks into many small republics closely tied to Moscow. In the last analysis the Soviet Union was nothing more than the familiar "Great Indivisible Russia" painted red.

The next task of the Bolsheviks was to colonize the Turkic lands. In this they obviously followed the policy of the Tsars. In the so-called Tartar Republic on the middle reaches of the Idel, for instance, 64.3% of the best land which formerly belonged to the Government and to monasteries was handed to Russian settlers. Likewise the best of the land opened up by the construction of the Turksib railway (linking Turkestan and Siberia) was given to Russians, while the native population was forced into regions unfit for habitation. Starvation and death for a great number of Turks was the result.

CHANGING ALPHABETS

Next the Bolsheviks attempted the cultural disintegration of the Turks. To destroy the unity of their education and literature, a congress of Turkologists, meeting in 1926 in Baku, abolished the Arab alphabet, replacing it with the Latin alphabet and producing for each of ten Turkish "nationalities" a Latin alphabet of its own. This was done in spite of the fact that all Turkic languages are very closely related. A second congress meeting two years later in Kazan tried to unify the Latin alphabet. The Bolsheviks considered this to be counter-revolutionary, and prohibited it.

After another ten years the attitude of Moscow had become openly Russian-imperialistic. It was decided once again to change the alphabet of the Turkic people. In the summer of 1938 by order from Moscow the Latin alphabet was replaced by the Russian, again to be used differently in different republics. Thus even the outward forms of national culture were made to disappear one by one. The Turkic literature of the pre-revolutionary period was banned. In its place the book stores and libraries were filled with Russian books in Turkic translations. Even the Turkic language was
attacked as preventing the cultural unity between Russians and Turks.

THE FIGHT AGAINST ISLAM
The struggle with the Mohammedan religion passed through various stages. First the Bolsheviks tried to introduce pro-Bolshevik movements into Islam. Failing in this, they began to attack the mullahs (Moslem priests). Enormous taxes were levied on mullahs and mosques; many mosques were closed or transformed into clubs and amusement halls. When in 1926 a world congress of Mohammedans was called together in Mecca under the chairmanship of Ibn Saud, the Bolsheviks, in order to win the sympathy of the Moslem world, allowed a delegation of Russian Mohammedans under Mufti Fakhretdin to participate and slightly relaxed their pressure. But the campaign against Islam was soon resumed. Thousands of mosques were closed and thousands of mullahs exiled or executed.

THE TURKS FIGHT BACK
Stubbornly and ceaselessly the Turks continued their resistance. There was a never-ending chain of political trials. The most extensive of these was held against Sultan-Galiyev and led to the exile of many thousands. Similar trials took place against Ibrahim in the Crimea, the Mussavatists in Azerbaijan, and the nationalists of Turkestan. They all prove the nationalist ardor of the Turks, whose desire for independence cannot be destroyed by any terroristic measures on the part of the Bolsheviks or Russians. Nor will it be destroyed by the forcible settlement of Turkic nomads, nor by the enforced shift of the agriculture of Central Asia from grain to cotton production, which made the population, who cannot eat their cotton, dependent on the Soviet Government and the transportation of food supplies from Siberia.

The fight for Turkic liberty is also carried on outside the Soviet Union. Turks from all territories within the USSR have their national committees and their own press abroad. The leader of the Idel-Ural Turks and one of the most prominent men in the entire Turkic movement is Ayaz Ishaki. He has been a leading writer among the Turks since the early years of this century. Until the Bolsheviks came into power, his books were read by all young Turks of Idel-Ural. He was an implacable enemy of Tsarist tyranny and spent a large part of his life in Tsarist prisons. During his visit to the Far East in 1933 he organized a Turkic center in Mukden to unite the Idel-Ural Turks, of whom some fifteen thousand live in the Orient. The periodical Milli Bayrak, founded by him, is still published in Mukden.

In their fight for liberty, the Turks' common history, language, culture, and religion, as well as their common enemy, are factors uniting them. They have become conscious of this unity, in the USSR as well as abroad. They look with sympathy and admiration toward free Turkey, and are observing with suspicion the movements of Great Britain in Iran. And they are convinced that they now face the fall of the Bolshevist empire better prepared than they were at the time of the downfall of the Tsars.