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Enver Pasha and the Basmachi Rebellion

ABSTRACT

This essay explores the reasons why Enver Pasha, one of the exiled Young Turk rulers of the Ottoman Empire, decided to lead a Central Asian resistance movement called the *Basmachi Rebellion* from 1921 until his death at the hands of the Soviets in August 1922. This essay examines political and social developments in the Ottoman Empire and Russia which were an influence on Enver’s decision to join the Basmachi movement. It argues that although some historians have viewed Enver’s actions in Central Asia as foolish and badly planned, his decisions can be understood within the context of the Pan-Turkic and Pan-Islamic ideology prevalent during this period.

BIOGRAPHY

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ENVER PASHA AND THE BASMACHI REBELLION

In this essay I will explore the reasons why Enver Pasha, one of the Young Turk rulers of the Ottoman Empire, would choose to join a Central Asian resistance movement called the Basmachi rebellion. For a short period from late 1921 through to his death in battle against the Soviets in August 1922, Enver became a leader in this rebellion which formed as a reaction to Soviet rule in Turkestan and attracted a wide variety of people including tribesmen who had lost their grazing lands to Russian settlers, the exiled Emir of Bukhara and Turkish nationalists and reformers. To understand Enver's motives it is necessary to understand the contemporary political and social developments in the Ottoman Empire and Russia. I will argue that Enver's actions must be placed within the context of the Pan-Turkic and Pan-Islamic ideologies prevalent at this time.

Enver Pasha, the "Hero of Freedom" in the 1908 Young Turk revolution, was born in Istanbul in 1881 and rose quickly up the ranks of the military forces. He joined a political organisation called the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) in 1908 and became involved in the revolution that led to the restoration of the constitution and parliament on 23 July and the deposition of Sultan Abdul Hamid II in April 1909. In 1913, Enver and two other CUP members, Talat and Jemal Pashas, led a coup against the government and ruled from then on as a dictatorship. The Young Turks were initially very successful and popular, and regained some of the territory lost by the Ottoman government in the Balkan Wars. After Enver's marriage in 1914 to the niece of Sultan Mehmet V, they legitimated their hold on power even further. When the First World War broke out, the Ottoman Empire allied itself to Germany which resulted in the loss of the Empire at the conclusion to the war in October 1918. The Young Turk leaders were forced to escape Istanbul on a German submarine, and were later sentenced to death *in absentia* for war crimes against the Armenians.ⁱ

In order to understand the next phase of Enver's life and the rise of the Basmachi resistance in Turkestan, it is necessary to look at the political and social developments up to that time. In particular, I want to trace the development of Pan-Islamic and Pan-Turkic thought in Russia and the Ottoman Empire.ⁱⁱ An early influence on many later movements was Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, who in the mid-19th century advocated the need for Muslims to unite and modernise their society within an Islamic framework.ⁱⁱⁱ Ismail Gaspirinsky, born in the Crimea in 1851, was influenced by the Pan-Islamic ideas of al-Afghani and also by the rising Pan-Slavic movement prevalent in Russia at this time. He advocated the use of one Turkic language to unite all the Turkic peoples,^{iv} and started the *Jadid* (New Method) schools, which were widely adopted across Russia. The word *Jadid* soon became synonymous with the reform movement, and reformers were known as *Jadids*.^v In 1905, Russia brought in political and social changes which allowed Muslim deputies to enter the *Duma* (parliament) and to hold the First Muslim Congress. By the Third Muslim Congress, in August 1906, opinions were divided on how the movement should progress. Gasprinsky felt Pan-Turkism should be confined to cultural affairs while other leaders such as Yusuf Akcura from the Volga area wanted more political involvement. In the end, a political party was created called Ittifaqul-Muslimin (The Union of Muslims).^{vi} The nationalistic nature of Ittifaqul-Muslimin and its links to the Ottoman Empire became a concern to the Russian government, which defined Ittifaqul-Muslimin's aims as Pan-Islamic and Pan-Turkist. In order to control the situation, they actively supported the *Kadimist* (conservative) faction among the Turkic peoples, and limited the power of the reformers.^{vii} Over time, they also lowered the number of Muslim deputies in parliament from 25 in 1906 to six by 1912.^{viii} Many Tatar and Azeri Turkic nationalists migrated to the Ottoman Empire at this time and continued the Pan-Turkic movement from there.^{ix}

The Ottoman Empire had also experimented with a number of ideologies in the 19th century in an attempt to stop the loss of territory. The *Tanzimat* reforms and the concept of Ottomanism had tried to instill in all citizens a sense of equality and loyalty to the Empire,^x but these ideas were rejected as the Empire continued to disintegrate.^{xi} Sultan Abdul Hamid II instead emphasised his role as Caliph and Protector of Muslims,^{xii} and used Pan-Islamism as a political weapon against the European powers.^{xiii} The concept of Turkishness developed quite late, because Ottoman intellectuals viewed Turkish people as unsophisticated nomads and peasants. The Hungarian Arminius Vambery, writing in the mid-19th century said: 'The word *Turkluk* ... was taken to be the synonym of boorishness and savagery ... I found nobody in Istanbul who was seriously interested in the question of the Turkish nationality or language.'^{xiv} By the late 19th century this changed, as Turkish intellectuals became interested in surrounding nationalist movements and by European works about Turkic people such as Leon Cahun's 1896 work *Introduction a l'Histoire de l'Asie*.^{xv} Turkic immigrants from the Balkans and Russia, who by this stage comprised nearly half of the population, also influenced Turkish thought.^{xvi} Yusuf Akcura, in his 1904 essay "*Uc Tarz-I Siyaset*" (Three Policies), compared Ottomanism, Islamism and Turkism and their effectiveness as a policy for the Ottoman state. He concluded that the only hope for the Ottoman Empire was that Turks could come to an understanding of their Turkishness. However, he felt that this philosophy still

needed a lot of work because it was so new and that it may fail because ‘[t]he majority of the Turks today have forgotten their past.’^{xvii}

Turkish intellectuals such as Ziya Gokalp then took up these ideas. Gokalp, born in Diyarbekir of mixed Turkish and Kurdish ancestry, argued that Turks needed to find their national spirit which was located in the pre-Islamic history of the ancient Turks and rulers such as Genghis Khan and Timur.^{xviii} He set up museums and libraries and was a member of the *Türk Ocakları* (Turkish Hearth) established in 1911 to awaken a pride in Turkishness.^{xix} In his poem “*Turan*” he stated: ‘The country of the Turks is not Turkey, nor yet Turkestan. Their country is a broad everlasting land—Turan.’^{xx} The Young Turks were greatly influenced by the Pan-Turkic ideas of Gokalp and Akcura,^{xxi} and included them as members of their central committee.^{xxii} The *Türk Ocakları* became a meeting ground for nationalists and once the war started also took on the function of dispatching agents abroad to propagate Pan-Turkism. Enver patronised an organisation called *Izco* (Boy Scouts), which British intelligence said gave military training to Turkish youth who were indoctrinated in pre-Islamic Turkic beliefs and rituals. It was even claimed the boys said their prayers to the ancient Turkish God Tanrı, rather than Allah.^{xxiii} In a speech delivered by the President of the Ottoman Chamber, Halil Bey, in May 1914, their focus was clearly stated: ‘I ask our teachers, journalists, poets and all our intellectuals to remind continuously our present generation and the future ones, via their lessons, writings and moral influence, that beyond the frontiers there are brethren to be liberated and bits of the Fatherland to be redeemed.’^{xxiv}

From the time they took power, the Young Turks were involved in political activities in Russian territory. In 1910, British intelligence reported that Enver, as Consul-General at Tabriz, was plotting with the Karadag Khans in Azerbaijan, and that Talat was supplying arms to Turkic peoples in Russian territory. From 1911, CUP branches were established in Russia and Turkish agents spread Pan-Turkic and Pan-Islamic propaganda to the Muslim populations. During the war, the Young Turks made a number of tactical and moral errors which are difficult to explain unless Pan-Turkic ideology is taken into account. In December 1914, Enver, in command of the Third Army on the Russian front at Sarikamis, lost most of his 90,000 troops due to poor and rushed tactical planning.^{xxv} Following this, in 1915, as Minister of War, he decided to deport the Armenian population to internment camps in Syria, resulting in the death or exile of almost all of the Armenians of Anatolia.^{xxvi} The official reason given was that the Armenians were aiding Russian forces, but they were also located in the way of a potential Pan-Turkic territory.^{xxvii}

The 1917 Revolution was seen by Enver as an opportunity to move into the Turkic areas in Russia,^{xxviii} and this led to his decision, in May 1918, to transfer vital military units from the Middle East to the Republic of Azerbaijan in order to gain control of Baku and the Caspian Sea. In doing this, he acted against the wishes of the Germans, who were in negotiation with the Soviets regarding access to the Baku oil supply.^{xxix} By September, Enver’s brother Nuri Pasha, with an army of 60,000 men, defeated the British forces and took Baku, but the victory was short-lived, as they were expelled again by the British after the Armistice was signed in October 1918.^{xxx} Some historians have suggested that the desire of the Young Turks for a Pan-Turkic Empire in Russia was so strong that it was a major factor in their decision to enter the war in the first place.^{xxxi} This is supported by a proclamation released by the Young Turks on entering the war: ‘The ideal of our nation and our people leads us towards the destruction of our Muscovite enemy, in order to obtain thereby a natural frontier to our Empire, which should include and unite all branches of our race.’^{xxxii}

In Russia, the situation of the Turkic peoples went through a period of massive change in the time leading up to the revolution, and the formation of the Basmachi resistance stemmed from these developments. Since 1912, the Russian government had successfully quelled Turkish nationalism in the Tatar areas, and the conservative faction maintained control. Turkish intellectuals focused instead on strengthening the Tatar position within the Russian system, a process which was helped by their acceptance into all levels of Russian society.^{xxxiii} When World War One commenced, the Tatar newspaper *Turmush* said that Turks should support their Russian compatriots, and the Muslim faction of the *Duma* stated that Muslims should ‘fight to the end for the honor and integrity of Russia.’^{xxxiv} This was not the case in Turkestan, which had been a centre of rebellion and activism since the Russian conquest in the late 19th century. Turkic nomads lost their grazing lands to Russian settlers, and in 1907 the president of the agricultural association said that the Kazaks, as descendants of barbarians such as Ghengiz and Timur, deserved destruction. The agricultural lands of the Oases and the Ferghana Valley were also turned over to cotton production which led to a dependence on Russia for food and resulted in a widespread famine. The first rebellion occurred in 1898, when Kazak and Kirgiz tribesmen and bankrupt farmers led by Dukchi Ishan, a village Imam, destroyed a Russian barracks in Ferghana. Although the revolt was crushed and the leaders killed, the underlying causes were not fixed. The 1916 *Merdikar* (man of work) revolt, against the call up for non-combatant service in the war, started in the Kazak steppe and extended into Ferghana and Uzbek country. Russian troops and colonists were murdered, and, in retaliation, thousands of tribespeople were

massacred.^{xxxv} The tribesmen fled to the mountains and formed a guerilla movement which later merged with the Basmachi.^{xxxvi}

The 1917 February revolution was welcomed an opportunity for change by Turkic peoples, and in May 800 delegates attended an All Muslim Congress in Moscow. The divisions in Turkic society soon became apparent at this congress, with disagreement among the conservative Ulema, liberal Jadids, Socialists and Muslim Communists, as well as between Turks from different areas, on the form of state they should adopt.^{xxxvii} The final vote led to a decision to create a number of autonomous democratic republics with a central Muslim administration.^{xxxviii} Before these organisations could be set up, the Russian provisional government fell to the Bolsheviks on October 26, 1917.^{xxxix} Soon after taking power, Lenin and Stalin issued a declaration that said the Soviets would adopt the following principles: '(1) equality and sovereignty of the nations of Russia (2) the right of the nations of Russia to free self-determination, including the right to secede and form independent states ...'.^{xl} This was followed by manifesto addressed to 'All the toiling Muhammadians in Russia and in the East': 'Henceforth your faith and customs, your national and cultural institutions, are proclaimed freely and unhindered. This is your right.'^{xli}

Lenin's speech was taken at face value, as a go-ahead for Turkic groups to set up their own governments, and a number of Turkic republics were formed. The first was the Bashkurd Republic created on November 21 and based at Orenburg under the leadership of Ahmed Zeki Velidi Togan, a reformer and nationalist.^{xlii} In Tashkent, the Ulema also proposed to form a coalition government with the Russian Soviets.^{xliii} But the Russian-dominated group refused to co-operate with the Muslims because '[t]here are no proletarian class organisations among the native inhabitants.'^{xliiv} This rejection led to an unlikely alliance of the Jadids and Ulema, who, on November 28, announced the creation of the Kokand Republic. Led by a Jajid, Mustafa Chokai,^{xliv} it was Pan-Turkic in ideology, and included delegates from around Turkestan.^{xlvi} The Tashkent Soviets, acting independently of the Moscow government attempted to crush both republics. They sent Red Troops to Orenburg in February 1918, and arrested the leaders of the Bashkurd government,^{xlvii} and on February 19 they razed Kokand, killing large numbers of people.^{xlviii} The Bashkurd Republic was luckier than Kokand, as Russian White forces re-took Orenburg in April and released the Bashkurd leaders from prison. Togan then built up a strong army, and by February 1919 was able to negotiate with Moscow and achieve autonomy in exchange for supporting the Soviets.^{xlix}

The Central party in Moscow blamed the Turkic separatist movements on the refusal of the Tashkent Soviets to include Muslims in the party organisation. They forced the Tashkent government to co-operate with the Muslims and by June 1919 Muslims held four of the eleven seats in the Communist party.^l The end result of the Soviet actions was that Jadid Communists took control of the Tashkent party, which they renamed the Turkic Communist Party, and said their purpose was '[c]onsolidating and attracting other Turkic nationalities ... around a Turkic Soviet republic.'^{li} They were soon joined by a group of Young Bukharans who had attempted to bring in reforms in Bukhara and escaped a purge by the Emir.^{lii} Once the Soviets realised the danger the Jadids posed to central rule, they brought in other means to control them. In the Bashkurd Republic they destroyed Togan's military advantage by sending his forces away to fight in other parts of Russia. They also put Soviet agents into the Kokand government, and in May 1920 issued a decree subordinating the Bashkurd republic to the central party.^{liii} In June 1920, a commission sent to assess the situation in Tashkent concluded that the Jadid Communists were Turkish nationalists who supported the Basmachi. They removed them from the party, and instead appointed conservative Muslim delegates whom they could control. The Soviets also destroyed the Emir's regime, and created a People's Republic of Bukhara run jointly by the Young Bukharans and the Communists.^{liv} The Young Khiva Party seized power from the Khan of Khiva, and also began to rule in alliance with Soviets. However, neither Khiva nor Bukhara had an army or any real power, and were easily absorbed into the Soviet system.^{lv} Togan, in an attempt to save the Bashkurd Republic by political means, had met with Stalin in Moscow in May 1920. In his account of the meeting he sums up the Soviet attitude:^{lvi} 'He was very friendly, and it seemed as if his heart burned for the Eastern Turks, for us small nations. But he told me—as had Lenin a few days before—I ought to do my duty in the spirit of Great Russia and not to worry so much about governing a small tribe.'^{lvii}

It was into this political environment that Enver and Jemal entered when they arrived in Moscow in 1920. The Soviets gave them protection in exchange for help in spreading communism to Muslims, and Jemal was sent to Kabul to stir up rebellion among Muslims in British India.^{lviii} The Soviets hoped Enver could take communism into Anatolia,^{lix} but his attempts to liaise with the Ankara government were rejected by Kemal, who saw him as a threat to his leadership. Enver then made Baku a rival centre of power to Ankara, from where he maintained contact with former CUP members in the resistance movement.^{lx} From July, Enver and his men waited near the Turkish border at Batumi, and British Intelligence reported that his aim was to enter Anatolia and overthrow

Kemal.^{lxi} However, in September Kemal won a major victory against the Greeks at Sakarya and consolidated his position as leader. He immediately declared an alliance with the Soviets, who then moved away from their plan to support Enver in Anatolia.^{lxii}

Meanwhile, in Turkestan, the Basmachi rebellion had become a real problem for the Soviets. It had started in 1918, when survivors from the Kokand massacre organised the tribesmen who had escaped the 1916 rebellion into a guerilla resistance movement.^{lxiii} The rebellion grew as it became clear that the Turkic republics had no chance of autonomy under Soviet rule.^{lxiv} In 1920, the exiled Emir of Bukhara and his supporters joined the movement which led to an unlikely alliance of the conservatives and the reformers.^{lxv} The Soviets sent Enver to Tashkent in October 1921, in the hope that he could suppress the rebellion. Instead Enver saw an opportunity to lead a Turkish nationalist movement in Turkestan. This was a dangerous move, as the Soviets had already recalled Jemal to Moscow for stirring up Turkic nationalism and suspected links to the Basmachi.^{lxvi} Togan advised Enver it would be safer to build a resistance movement from Afghanistan.^{lxvii} Enver, however, was not convinced and in a letter to his wife dated 7 November 1921 he made his intentions clear: 'Yesterday I sent letters to the capitals of Bokhara and Khiva, and I signed these as *Commander of the Supreme Turanian Revolutionary Armies*. The die is cast ... I can now return only after complete success ...'.^{lxviii}

What Enver did not initially understand was that the Basmachi were mostly comprised of tribesmen who were fighting for their traditional way of life. The ties that bound them were Islamic, not nationalistic,^{lxix} and they had little in common with the Jadids.^{lxx} Their lack of a common aim, apart from removing the Soviets, can be seen in the following example. Jemal had in 1920 sent the following message to the Basmachi: 'Our aim is to find a means to force the Russians to accept our proposals, to strengthen the national union, inspire a modern, national, political spirit ... to get rid of the shameful and disturbing activities of the Emir's adherents ...'.^{lxxi} When a young Jadid tried to explain these ideas to Toghay, a tribal chief, Toghay took from a sack a bunch of human ears which he said were cut from the heads of reformers.^{lxxii} Enver and his men were greeted with suspicion by the Basmachi, and were taken prisoner by Ibrahim Bey, a local tribal leader. They were only released when the ex-Emir of Bukhara gave Enver the title of Ghazi and accepted him as a leader.^{lxxiii} Enver, realising that the binding force of the tribes was not Turkic nationalism but Islam, then sent out the proclamation: 'I, who am the irreconcilable enemy of the infidels, salute you, the ghazis, who are fighting for the preservation of religion and fatherland ... I have declared jihad against the Russians ...'.^{lxxiv} Enver then had a number of successes, and by early in 1922 controlled a large part of Eastern Bukhara. A report from the *Times* at the time stated: 'The insurgent movement with Enver's name at its head and his brain and the organising and technical skill of his considerable staff of Young Turk officers to direct it, has made progress ... there is no doubt that Enver has got the insurgent movement going with more organisation and more co-ordination that it has had before, and that the Bolsheviks are finding the situation difficult to handle.'^{lxxv}

By April 1922, the Soviets decided to negotiate with Enver and offered independence to Turkestan and Bukhara within the Soviet system.^{lxxvi} Enver refused their offer, and demanded that they withdraw completely from Turkestan, with the result that Enver, with the support of only 3000 men,^{lxxvii} found himself up against a Soviet army of 20,000 men.^{lxxviii} At first he used guerilla tactics to maintain his hold on strategic positions such as the railway line to Termez and the Oxus River,^{lxxix} but foolishly attempted open warfare against the Soviets.^{lxxx} He also lost the assistance of the Emir, who resented Enver for adopting the title Commander in Chief of All the Mujahideen and saw him as a rival for his own position. By July Enver and his men were short of ammunition, and their escape routes into Afghanistan were blocked by the Soviets. They eventually retreated towards the Pamir Mountains near Baisun, where they were killed in a battle on 4 August 1922 at the village of Baljiwan.^{lxxxi} Enver's death was used by the various factions for political mileage. The Soviets found it helpful to keep him alive and reported later in 1922 that peace had been established between Enver and Moscow. Basmachi leaders also decided not to release news of his death in case it affected the resistance movement. However, by the end of October, Afghani papers published eyewitness accounts of his death that stated it occurred on the eve of the Eid celebration, when most of his forces had returned home. Enver was shot by Soviet machine gun fire while making a cavalry charge,^{lxxxii} and his body was later found by a local imam, who buried him at Abirderya village.^{lxxxiii}

The Basmachi movement continued for another decade after Enver's death. Haji Sami, described by British intelligence files as 'One of the cleverest and most valuable Pan-Islamic agents of the Committee of Union and Progress,'^{lxxxiv} took over leadership of Enver's forces. However, unable to gain aid or supplies, both he and Togan were eventually forced to escape Soviet territory.^{lxxxv} By 1931, Ibrahim Bey was captured, and, with the movement lacking leadership, the Soviets were able to quell the remaining rebellion.^{lxxxvi} They initially adopted a tactic of supporting Islam in order to gain the people's trust, they then appointed pro-Soviet imams who announced that Muslims should obey the Soviet state, and the Basmachi rebellion eventually died down.^{lxxxvii}

Togan, who made his way to Istanbul, sent a letter to Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky which sums up the Soviet strategy with the Turkic peoples: ‘Everything has turned out as the Russians wished it ... cooperation with us has been a pure pretence ...’^{lxxxviii}

In conclusion, Enver has been portrayed by some historians as a rash adventurer who took a desperate gamble with the Basmachi because he had no other options.^{lxxxix} While I agree that Enver did initially misjudge the situation, and did not understand the divisions within the Basmachi, I do not think his decision to join was a desperate last resort. Firstly, it is important to remember that, even after the war, Enver had the support of a number of former CUP members and ex-Ottoman army officers who had escaped Turkey. This included Jemal Pasha, who also attempted to propagate Turkic nationalism amongst the tribes in Central Asia. Enver’s first preference was naturally to return to the Ottoman Empire as leader of the resistance movement. When this was ruled out by Kemal’s success he still did not have to join the Basmachi. He could have supported the Soviets or he could have taken Togan’s advice and built up a resistance movement from Afghanistan. It is clear to me that Enver had a long-standing desire to rule in Central Asia, which came to the fore when he found himself in a position to make it happen. I think it is likely he thought he could create a Pan-Turkic power in Central Asia and then move back into Turkey as a victor at a later date.

Enver’s decision to lead the Basmachi resistance is understandable when viewed within the context of his Pan-Turkic ideology. Pan-Turkism and Pan-Islamism were the dominant political ideologies in the Ottoman Empire in the early 20th century. A desire for a Pan-Turkic state influenced a number of the decisions the Young Turks made during World War One. Looking at the situation in retrospect, Enver would probably have been better to take Togan’s advice and work on a resistance movement from Afghanistan. He may have had more success if he had arrived in Tashkent in 1917, at the time Togan and the nationalists had formed the Bashkurd Republic. He would have found more in common with a movement comprised of Jadids and Turkic nationalists than he did with the Basmachi tribesmen. Enver also made some tactical errors that may have affected the outcome of the struggle, such as engaging in open warfare, his alienation of the Emir of Bukhara, and his uncompromising attitude to the Soviets in April 1922.

Even though Enver had the odds stacked against him, he did manage to unite a large number of tribesmen in his short time as a leader, and had a number of early victories. He was quick to realise the importance of Islam to the Basmachi, and put aside his Pan-Turkic leanings for a Pan-Islamic stance to gain legitimacy. By all accounts Enver was successful in doing this, and commanded a lot of respect among his men. His grave is still a site of pilgrimage for the descendants of the tribesmen who fought with him.^{xc} In Togan’s account of the Basmachi movement, Enver is depicted as a Turkish hero.^{xcii} I would like to finish with a quote from Enver that nicely sums up his attitude to the situation he found himself in: ‘The other day I read a German book, and one sentence inspired me: “When we can’t realize our ideals, we can at least idealize our reality”’.^{xciii}

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