

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM
IN TURKISTAN IN THE 19TH–20TH CENTURIES**

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Annotation: This article examines the changing position of women within the education system of Turkistan from the traditional order of the nineteenth century through the reformist Jadid movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the mass literacy campaigns of the early Soviet period. Using a qualitative historical-comparative method based on Jadid periodicals, secondary historical scholarship, and studies of Soviet policy in Central Asia, the article identifies three successive phases in the development of women's education: informal religious instruction confined to the household, Jadid-led reform aimed at winning public acceptance for girls' schooling, and Soviet state compulsion, most visibly embodied in the 1927 Hujum campaign. The findings show that each phase built upon, and in some respects erased, the one before it, and that the near-universal female literacy characteristic of Uzbekistan today rests on this layered and at times contradictory history. The article concludes that understanding this trajectory is essential to interpreting the present-day educational and social landscape of Central Asia.

Key words: Turkistan; women's education; Jadid movement; usul-i jadid; otin-oyi; girls' schooling; Hujum; Zhenotdel; Soviet Central Asia; female literacy; colonial education; gender and modernization.

Introduction

For most of the nineteenth century, the education of girls and women across Turkistan was almost entirely absent from formal, institutionalized life. Learning, where it existed for women, took place informally, in private homes, and under the guidance of an otin-oyi, a locally respected woman teacher who instructed small groups of girls in reading the Qur'an and basic religious before adolescence. Over the following hundred years, however, the region moved from this near-total absence of formal female education to a duties. Public schooling — the maktab and the madrasa — was built around and for boys and men, and a girl's access to it, if any, ended well before adolescence. Over the following hundred years, however, the region moved from this near-total absence of formal female education to a state-mandated system of universal schooling for both sexes.

This transformation raises questions that remain relevant to the study of gender, colonialism, and modernization in Central Asia: What role did indigenous reformers play in changing attitudes toward women's education, as against the role of external,

imperial or Soviet, intervention? How did the goals and methods of reform change as Turkistan moved from Russian colonial rule to Soviet statehood? And what does the uneven, sometimes coercive character of this process suggest about the relationship between education and social change more broadly? This article addresses these questions by tracing the position of women within Turkistani education across three historical phases, and by evaluating the extent to which later phases built on, rather than simply replaced, the ones that preceded them.

Literature Review

Scholarship on women's education in Turkistan can be grouped into three broad strands. The first strand examines the Jadid movement as an educational and cultural reform project. Studies of Jadidism, including recent work published in regional academic journals, describe how Jadid reformers introduced *usul-i jadid*, the phonetic 'new method' of teaching literacy, and sought to replace outdated religious schooling with a modern, secular curriculum applicable to both sexes. Within this literature, a smaller but growing body of research addresses the 'woman question' specifically, documenting how Jadid intellectuals such as Abdurauf Fitrat and Abdulla Avloni argued in the Turkistani press for girls' schooling, the prevention of early and forced marriage, and opposition to polygamy, and how new-method schools in Samarkand, Tashkent, and Kokand began, on a limited scale, to admit girls and to employ women as teachers.

The second strand concerns the Soviet Hujum campaign of 1927 and its consequences for women's education and social status. Foundational works in this area, notably Marianne Kamp's study of the 'new woman' in Uzbekistan and Douglas Northrop's analysis of gender and power under Stalinism, reconstruct how the Soviet state combined mass unveiling campaigns with literacy drives organized through women's clubs and *Zhenotdel* structures, and how this combination produced both a rapid rise in female enrollment and a violent social backlash against women who complied. Adeeb Khalid's broader history of the making of Soviet Uzbekistan situates these educational campaigns within the larger Soviet project of nation-building and ideological transformation.

The third strand, smaller and more fragmented, attempts to connect the Jadid and Soviet periods directly, asking to what extent Soviet mass education built on institutional and intellectual foundations that the Jadids had already established, and to what extent Soviet repression of the Jadids in the late 1920s and 1930s severed that continuity. This article draws on all three strands, but places particular weight on tracing the connective tissue between them, an area that existing literature treats less systematically than either period taken on its own.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative, historical-comparative methodology appropriate to a topic that spans more than a century and two distinct political orders.

Evidence was drawn from three categories of source. First, primary and near-primary material produced by Jadid reformers themselves, including references to articles published in the periodicals *Oyina* and *Sadoi Turkestan*, and the record of specific new-method schools and their founders, as reported in the secondary historical literature. Second, secondary scholarly sources on the Jadid movement and on Soviet policy in Central Asia, prioritizing peer-reviewed historical studies and recognized monographs in the field, including works by Marianne Kamp, Adeeb Khalid, Douglas Northrop, and Shoshana Keller. Third, recent regional academic publications addressing the Jadid movement's engagement with women's issues, used to corroborate and supplement the English-language historiography.

The analysis proceeds by periodization: the pre-reform traditional order, the Jadid reform period, and the Soviet mass-education period are treated as analytically distinct phases, each examined for its institutional forms, its leading actors, its stated rationale for female education, and its documented reach and limitations. Continuities and discontinuities between phases are then assessed by comparing the schools, personnel, and arguments associated with each period. This comparative structure allows the article to evaluate claims of continuity between the Jadid and Soviet periods, rather than treating the two as unrelated episodes, while remaining attentive to the very different political contexts, colonial and Soviet, in which each phase unfolded. Given the historical and interpretive nature of the subject, the methodology is qualitative rather than statistical; where quantitative indicators such as literacy rates are cited, they are drawn from the secondary literature and presented as approximate orders of magnitude rather than precise measurements.

Findings and Discussion

Before the reform movements of the late nineteenth century, the education available to girls in Turkistan was shaped by custom and religion rather than by any centralized policy. The *otin-oyi* tradition gave a narrow circle of girls, usually from families of some means, access to basic literacy, Qur'anic recitation, and religious instruction, delivered inside private homes rather than in public institutions. This informal system reached only a small fraction of the female population, and its content was narrowly religious and moral rather than academic in the modern sense.

The Russian conquest of Turkistan in the second half of the nineteenth century added a new, parallel layer to this picture: a small number of Russian-native schools were opened for the local population, but these institutions were overwhelmingly oriented toward boys, and colonial administrators showed little interest in extending schooling to Muslim girls. Colonial rule reorganized political and economic life across the region, but it did not, in its first decades, meaningfully change the educational prospects of women. It was social reformers from within Turkistani society itself, rather than the colonial administration, who first placed women's education on the public agenda.

The Jadid movement, which emerged in Turkistan at the end of the nineteenth century and gathered strength in the first two decades of the twentieth, was primarily an educational and cultural reform movement before it became a political one. Its founding idea was *usul-i jadid*, the 'new method' of teaching reading through phonetics rather than rote memorization of the Arabic alphabet, and its broader aim was to replace outdated religious schooling with a modern, secular curriculum that would prepare Turkistanis to compete with the modernizing world around them.

Crucially, the Jadids did not treat this reform agenda as a matter for men alone. Leading Jadid intellectuals — among them Abdurauf Fitrat, Abdulla Avloni, Is'haq Khan Ibrat, and Munavvar Qori Abdurashidkhonov — argued explicitly that the education of women was a precondition for the progress of the nation as a whole, since it was mothers who first shaped the character and worldview of the next generation. Jadid periodicals such as *Oyina* and *Sadoi Turkestan* carried articles and reader letters on girls' schooling, opposition to child marriage, and criticism of polygamy, giving the question of women's status a public airing it had not previously had in Turkistani print culture.

These ideas were translated into concrete institutions. New-method schools founded by reformers such as Abdukodir Shakuri in Samarkand, Eshonkhoja Khonkhojaev and Sobirkhon Rakhimov in Tashkent, and Muhammadjon Khaliqi in Kokand opened their doors, in various forms, to girls as well as boys, and in some cases employed women as teachers — Khaliqi's own sister, Soliyakhon Abdukhaliq, taught alongside him. Jadid writers also produced didactic literature aimed specifically at women and mothers, intended to persuade a broader public that female literacy served the family and the nation rather than threatening them.

It is important not to overstate the reach of these reforms. Jadid schools remained a minority current within Turkistani education as a whole, concentrated in a handful of cities, dependent on the initiative of individual reformers, and frequently opposed by conservative clergy who viewed the education of girls outside the home as a violation of custom. Female literacy on the eve of the Russian Revolution remained extremely low by any standard. Yet the Jadids' contribution was less about the numbers they reached than about the terms of the debate they established: for the first time, women's education was framed publicly as a matter of social progress and national survival, an argument that would carry over, in transformed and radicalized form, into the Soviet period that followed.

The establishment of Soviet power in Turkistan after 1917 changed both the scale and the character of the campaign for women's education. Where the Jadids had relied on persuasion, private initiative, and gradual institution-building, the Soviet state pursued female literacy as an explicit instrument of policy, backed by the coercive power of the Communist Party. Women's Departments, known as *Zhenotdels*, were created within party structures after 1919 and tasked with

organizing literacy classes, women's clubs, orphanages, and childcare consultations, laying the administrative groundwork for what would become a mass campaign.

That campaign reached its most dramatic expression in the Hujum, launched in Tashkent on International Women's Day, 8 March 1927. Conceived as an 'assault' on the customs that Soviet authorities associated with the seclusion and subordination of Muslim women, the Hujum combined public unveiling demonstrations with organized drives to enroll women in literacy schools and, later, in the industrial and agricultural workforce. The campaign was accompanied by legal measures banning polygamy, child marriage, and bride price, and it made it a criminal offence to obstruct a girl's or woman's access to school.

The Hujum was neither peaceful nor uncontested. Its methods were often coercive, and the sudden, state-driven character of the unveiling campaign provoked fierce social backlash: many women who complied were subjected to ostracism, family breakdown, and, in a significant number of documented cases, violence from relatives or community members opposed to the changes. Historians of the period have therefore treated the Hujum as a genuinely double-edged episode — a policy that expanded women's access to education and public life while inflicting real and sometimes lethal costs on the women it claimed to liberate.

Whatever its human costs, the campaign's effect on female enrollment and literacy was substantial and lasting. Literacy schools attached to women's clubs spread rapidly through the 1920s and 1930s, new teacher-training institutions and textbooks were produced specifically to support the expansion of schooling, and female literacy rates, which had stood at only a few percent before the revolution, rose sharply over the following two decades. By the middle of the twentieth century, general literacy in Uzbekistan, including among women, had reached the great majority of the adult population, a transformation that built directly on the institutional foundations the Jadids had first laid a generation earlier, even as Soviet power suppressed the Jadid movement itself in the purges of the 1930s.

Comparing the three phases directly, the findings point to a pattern of partial continuity rather than either simple progress or clean rupture. The Jadids supplied the intellectual justification for female education and the first working models of mixed or girls'-only schooling; the Soviet state supplied the resources, legal compulsion, and organizational scale needed to make that education nearly universal, while at the same time eliminating the individuals and networks that had originated the idea. This double relationship, of dependence and erasure at once, is the central finding of this comparative reading and helps explain why the history of women's education in Turkistan resists a single, simple narrative of steady improvement.

This history also complicates any assumption that expanding access to education is necessarily a benign or uncontested process. The expansion of women's education in Turkistan was driven by two very different sets of actors with different motives —

indigenous reformers seeking national renewal, and a colonial-successor state pursuing ideological transformation and social control — and it was achieved, in the Soviet case, at a real human cost that the historical record should not obscure. Understanding this layered and sometimes contradictory history is essential to understanding the roots of the near-universal female literacy and high rates of women's participation in education that characterize Uzbekistan today.

Conclusion

The transformation of women's place in Turkistan's education system over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was neither linear nor the achievement of any single movement. It began with the narrow, informal instruction offered by the otin-oyi tradition, was reimagined by Jadid reformers who argued that national progress depended on educated mothers, and was then imposed at scale by a Soviet state that combined genuine expansion of schooling with considerable coercion and social upheaval. The result, by the mid-twentieth century, was a level of female educational participation unimaginable a hundred years earlier. Tracing the connections and ruptures between the Jadid and Soviet phases, as this article has done, shows that mass female education in Central Asia was not a single achievement but the layered outcome of reform, repression, and reinvention — a legacy that continues to shape the educational and social landscape of Uzbekistan and the wider Central Asian region today.

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