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# Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, the Pioneering Bolshevik Theorist of Imperialism, National Liberation and Socialism

The first show trial of a Bolshevik

Thursday 5 October 2023, by [HENSAMAN Rohini](#) (Date first published: 1 September 2023).

**Given his prominence as a high-ranking Bolshevik, Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev is very little known. This is partly because he was cut off early in his career by persecution and ultimate execution in Stalin's purges and his writings suppressed for decades, but also due to distortion and lack of comprehension of his arguments even by many anti-Stalinists. This is a pity, because there is much we can learn from his writings as well as his practice even today.**

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The son of a progressive Tatar schoolteacher from a poor peasant background and a mother from a much richer Tatar noble family, he learned what he called 'class hatred' when he encountered bullying from her relatives at her father's estate. What attracted him to the Bolsheviks was their opposition to both class and imperialist oppression (Hamziç 2015, 4-5). He joined the Bolshevik Party as a young man of 25 in 1917 and became a member of the 'Central Muslim Commissariat,' a new body affiliated to the Narkomnats (The People's Commissariat for Nationalities, led by Joseph Stalin). Thanks to his talents as an orator and organiser, he soon became its president. Although professing atheism himself, he recommended that instead of combating Islam, the party should 'de-fanaticise' and secularise it, believing that the Muslims of Russia, especially the Tatars, would then be able to play a major role in the revolution (Rodinson 2004). The basis for this belief was his own experience in the Kazan Tatar Teachers' School, which was a centre of the *jadid* movement seeking to modernise the social, cultural and educational practices of Muslims (Guadagnolo 2011, 5-6). Subsequently, working as a teacher and journalist, he was drawn into revolutionary circles and married Rauza Chanysheva, who shared his political views and became a leading figure in the women's liberation movement (Mukhamedyarov and Sultanbekov 1990, 110).



In addition to being an original thinker, Sultan-Galiev became an important Bolshevik leader, and played a critical role in the civil war:

“Sultan-Galiev was in the front ranks of the Tatar Bolsheviks, he was active in establishing Soviet power in the Volga region, in crushing nationalist rebellions, in organising the defence of Kazan in August 1918 and in liquidating the results of the seizure of Kazan by the White forces. Sultan-Galiev distinguished himself through his organisational talents, his bravery, his gift for propaganda and his ability to win people over in the worst conditions... A simple list of all the responsibilities assumed by Sultan-Galiev shows the level of trust accorded to him by the Party and the Soviet government... altogether he occupied twenty posts...

We have no reliable sources on Sultan-Galiev’s conversations with Lenin, but many matters connected with Sultan-Galiev’s work, such as his appointment to the Narkomnats, were decided with Lenin’s participation. Lenin was well acquainted with Sultan-Galiev’s letters on difficult questions to do with national construction. He also took part in a conversation with Lenin, along with leaders of the Tatar Bolsheviks, on the question of education in the Tatar ASSR.

The period of May-June 1919 is particularly important. He was appointed by the Orgburo of the Central Committee to the Revolutionary Military Soviet (revoensovet) of the Second Army on the Eastern front which was commanded by one of the greatest generals of the civil war, V. I. Shorin. It is known that the situation on the Eastern front in March and April 1919 was critical: the Soviet troops had withdrawn from Izhevsk, Sarapul and many other towns which were under threat of occupation just as Kazan was in August 1918. At this critical moment, along with other outstanding political workers, such as P.K. Shternberg and A.K. Safonov, Sultan-Galiev restored the fighting capabilities of the army and prepared a counter-attack.” (Mukhamedyarov and Sultanbekov 1990, 110-11)

Yet on 4 May 1923 he was arrested, expelled from the party, and subjected to a show trial from June 9-12 in which he was accused of (a) treason and (b) factional activity. A meticulous examination of the records led Stephen Blank (1990, 162-63) to conclude that ‘The evidence is overwhelming that it was on Stalin’s initiative that he was arrested and then tried’; Stalin’s claim that he had evidence of Sultan-Galiev’s treachery in 1920 yet did nothing about it for three years ‘suggests that Stalin did not have the means to fabricate the “evidence” of treason till 1923, nor perhaps the power to do so.’ In fact, the intercepted letter produced by Stalin to accuse Sultan-Galiev of factional activity *within* the party contradicted the claimed contents of the letter (never released) which purportedly advocated an anti-party conspiracy.

Other Muslim delegates, who also came under attack, averred that the situation in Central Asia was no better than it had been under Tsarism, and that the ‘fear of being arrested or shot’ prevented them from speaking freely. Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev and other members of the Central Committee failed abysmally to defend Sultan-Galiev, who was left with no option but to confess to the crimes he had been accused of and promise good behaviour in the future in order to stay alive. ‘Apart from the profound consequences for nationality policy, the outcome and proceedings of this conference strongly suggested that Stalin was abandoning debate with his rivals

in favour of destroying them politically, psychologically, and personally' (Blank 1990, 168, 170-72, 175).



*Sultan Galiev at Second All-Russia Congress of Communist Organization of Oriental Peoples (1919)*

Indeed, Sultan-Galiev was destroyed in all these ways by his expulsion from the party and denunciation as a counter-revolutionary. As he wrote in despairing incomprehension, 'The counter-revolutionary label, glued to me, oppressed me even worse because in my heart I considered myself a Communist, a Leninist, a party member, a revolutionary. I am in all parts of my being protesting against it... I considered this a great injustice towards myself and experienced it as the greatest tragedy' (Sultan-Galiev 1923-25). Even as the trial was ongoing, he wrote a powerful self-defence in jail addressed to the Central Control Commission of the Communist Party, with additional copies to Stalin and Trotsky. It was entitled 'Who Am I?' and in it he reasserted his dedication to a worldwide socialist revolution, defended his criticisms of the party's nationalities policy and his own belief that the socialist revolution depended on the liberation of all colonies, and refuted all the accusations against himself, thus contradicting his 'confession' (Guadagnolo 2011, 1, 22-27).

One leader who was absent from this drama was Vladimir Ilyich Lenin. He had been struck down by a severe stroke in December 1922, after which he was housed in the Kremlin under strict instructions from Stalin that only his wife Nadezhda Krupskaya, his sister, three or four secretaries and the medical staff would have access to him, and he should be given no information about state and party affairs. When Krupskaya broke these orders, with the doctor's permission, Stalin phoned her and, in her own words, 'piled unworthy abuse and threats' on her (Lewin 1968, 71). The degree of Stalin's surveillance over Lenin gives credence to the claim by German communist trade unionist Heinrich Brandler that by 1921, Lenin's phone was already being tapped (Blank 1990, 163). Despite his partial paralysis, he dictated what came to be called his 'Testament'. In March 1923, Lenin suffered another severe stroke that left him unable to speak and half his body paralysed (Lewin 1968, 103). Bedridden, in April he was unable to attend the Twelfth Party Congress, at which Sultan-Galiev openly rejected Stalin's nationalities policies (Guadagnolo 2011, 18-19). In July, his health began to improve, and by October he was able to wander around Moscow and see visitors, who brought him news and discussed current affairs. At the beginning of 1924 he attended a Christmas party, and between January 17 and 20 spent time reading the report of the Thirteenth Party Congress, but suddenly died on January 21 (Lewin 1968, 175-176). Prior to his death he suffered from severe seizures, suggesting to specialists at a clinicopathological conference focused on historical figures at the University of Maryland that he died not of a stroke but of poisoning (Kolata 2012).

Having worked closely with Lenin and feeling that Lenin would understand and agree with his position on the national question, Sultan-Galiev believed that 'Ilyich would be interested in my business and restore me to the party. I looked forward to his recovery. His death killed this hope in me. Ilyich's loss for me was, therefore, a double blow,' the death of a much-loved comrade as well as any hope of rehabilitation (Sultan-Galiev 1923-25). This testimony was given when he was re-tried in 1928, after which he was sentenced to ten years of hard labour in the Solovki concentration camp

(Rodinson 2004). Meanwhile, the charge of '*Sultangalievism*' was used to purge party members from Muslim nationalities who were seen as posing a challenge to Stalin's line (Guadagnolo 2011, 31-32). They might have been replaced by Stalin's appointees from the same nationalities, but this was analogous to Vladimir Putin's replacement of Aslan Mashkadov, elected president of Chechnya, by warlord Ramzan Kadyrov, appointed by himself (Hensman 2018, 66-71). In 1939 Sultan-Galiev was sentenced to death as an enemy of the state and shot in January 1940. His wife and two children suffered the same fate. Only in May 1990, during Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* campaign, did the party finally rehabilitate him (Guadagnolo 2011, 38).

What were the positions that resulted in Sultan-Galiev's arrest, expulsion and execution? Was he right to believe that Lenin would have protected and reinstated him? An examination of their work can give us some clues.

### **Sultan-Galiev and Lenin on the National and Colonial Question**

In the second part of a three-part article published in *Zhizn' Natsional'nostei* (Life of the Nationalities) 39 (47) in 1919, Sultan-Galiev starts with the commonly-accepted position among Bolsheviks at the time that the Soviet system was the antithesis of the bourgeois-capitalist state and the Russian revolution had to develop into a worldwide revolution or otherwise risk obliteration. Understanding this, the leaders of the October Revolution looked to the West to internationalise their revolution. This is where he differed with them:

"It is true that the West European states, including their ally America, appear to be the countries where all the material and "moral" forces of international imperialism are concentrated, and it would seem that their territories are destined to become the chief battlefield in the war against imperialism. But in no way can we confidently say that there is enough strength in the Western proletariat to overthrow the Western bourgeoisie. This bourgeoisie is international and worldwide, and its overthrow demands a concentration of all the revolutionary will and all the revolutionary energy of the entire international proletariat, including the proletariat of the East.

In attacking international imperialism only with the West European proletariat, we leave it full freedom of action and manouver in the East. As long as international imperialism, represented by the Entente, dominates the East, where it is the absolute master of all natural wealth, then so long is it guaranteed of a successful outcome in all its clashes in the economic field with the working masses of the home countries, for it can always "shut their mouths" by satisfying their economic demands.

Our hopeless expectations of revolutionary aid from the West in the course of the last two years of the revolution in Russia eloquently confirm this thesis." (Sultan-Galiev 1919)

In the third and last part of his article, published in *Zhizn' Natsional'nostei* 42 (50) in 1919, Sultan-Galiev starts by outlining how the indigenous peoples of the Americas were wiped out and tens of millions of Africans enslaved by West European imperialism, which then 'turned its attention to the East, with India as its main goal'. He returns to his thesis that 'the East on the whole is the chief source of nourishment of international capitalism,' and therefore, 'Deprived of the East, and cut off from India, Afghanistan, Persia, and its other Asian and African colonies, Western European imperialism will wither and die a natural death' (Sultan-Galiev 1919). But there is a twist:

"We must never forget that, if on the one hand the East as a whole is completely enslaved by the West, on the other hand its own national bourgeoisie applies a no less heavy "internal" pressure on the laboring masses of the east.



### *Sultan Galiev with members of the Soviet of Nationalities*

We ought not for a minute forget the fact that the development of the international socialist revolution in the east must in no case limit itself only to the overthrow of the power of Western imperialism, but must go further. After this first stage, a second stage must be reached. This second stage is the complex question of overthrowing the Oriental clerical-feudal bourgeoisie, which pretends to be liberal, but which in reality is brutally despotic and which is capable, for the sake of its own selfish interests, to instantly change its stance toward its former foreign adversaries.” (Sultan-Galiev 1919)

He can hardly be accused of being soft on the colonial elites; indeed, with remarkable prescience he warns that ‘we are not in the least safe from the possibility that, after the overthrow of Western European imperialism, an Eastern imperialism will emerge’ (Sultan-Galiev 1919). Yet he saw the revolution as requiring national liberation for all colonies, including former Tsarist ones, and where the proletariat constituted a minuscule minority of the population and was, moreover, impoverished and uneducated, felt that cadres should be recruited from the middle-class intelligentsia and even the reformist clergy. ‘He wanted to make Kazan into a centre for Tartar national culture and... worked towards making Tartar and not Russian the official language of administration’ (Rodinson 2004).

During his period in Narkomnats, Sultan-Galiev travelled extensively and gained an intimate knowledge of the diversity of conditions in the Muslim regions. For example, in an article in April 1920, he welcomed the establishment of ‘Soviet Azerbaijan with its old and experienced revolutionary proletariat and fortified Communist Party’. By contrast, when he was sent to investigate a crisis among Crimean Tatars in February and March 1921, he was sharply critical of the lack of local Bolsheviks, the exorbitant use of terror, the neglect of important issues of land reform, education and public health. He warned that the glaring disparity between Soviet government officials relaxing in ‘Red Resorts’ and Crimean Tatars dying in the streets of hunger and disease had made Crimean Tatars view Soviet power as a new form of European imperialism. His article ‘How to Conduct Antireligious Propaganda Among Muslims,’ published in December 1921, demonstrates a nuanced argument that both the importance of their faith in the everyday lives of Muslims and their demoralisation resulting from defeats by imperialist forces need to be taken into account in conducting such propaganda. He recommended training Bolsheviks in the intricacies of Islam before they undertook such work among Muslims and banning former Orthodox Christian missionaries who had joined the Bolsheviks from participating in it. They should also tailor their message to the religious cultures that were dominant among particular communities: a more secular culture among Tatars, animism and superstition in Bashkiria, religious dogmatism in Turkestan, Khiva and Bukhara (Guadagnolo 2011, 12-16).

His articles and policies were very much part of a Marxist debate that had begun well before the Russian Revolution. Lenin, starting from a position that favoured centralisation of the party and state and assimilation of non-Russian ethnic groups in the empire into the Russian language and culture, changed his position as a result of debate with Marxists from the Tsarist colonies, the capitulation of Second International leaders to ruling class imperialism in 1914, and his own hatred of racism and ‘Great-Russian chauvinism,’ a term which he used to mean something like the ethnic

Russian equivalent of White supremacism (Blanc 2016). One consequence of this change was his insistence on the right to self-determination of the former Tsarist colonies, up to and including their right to secede from any union with Russia. There was strong opposition to this position within the party, but Lenin's position prevailed, with full independence granted to Poland, Finland and the Baltic republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the formation of fifteen union republics with the right to secede, and dozens of autonomous republics and regions.

"Within this constitutional framework, for most of the 1920s the Soviets pursued a range of policies aimed at promoting the national, economic, and cultural advancement of the non-Russians: priority to the local language, a massive increase in native language schools, development of national cultures, and staffing the Soviet administration as far as possible with local nationals. Collectively, these policies were known as *korenizatsiya*, or 'rooting.' Although widely opposed by local Russian (and some non-Russian) communists, these policies were generally successful in establishing local national leaderships and strengthening national identities associated with particular territories that formed the basis for what later became the post-Soviet independent states." (Smith 2004)

Stalin was at the opposite extreme, intent on moving towards total centralisation and an aggressive Russifier despite being of Georgian origin himself (Lebedev 2023). When Lenin, recuperating from a stroke, got news that one of Stalin's collaborators had resorted to physical violence against a Georgian party member who objected to centralisation, he was horrified (Lewin 1968, 68-69). At the end of December 1922, he dictated the following notes:

"It is said that a united apparatus was needed... [T]he apparatus we call ours is, in fact, still quite alien to us; it is a bourgeois and tsarist hotch-potch... It is quite natural that in such circumstances the 'freedom to secede from the union' by which we justify ourselves will be a mere scrap of paper, unable to defend the non-Russians from the onslaught of that really Russian man, the Great-Russian chauvinist, in substance a rascal and a tyrant, such as the typical Russian bureaucrat is...

Here we have an important question of principle: how is internationalism to be understood? ...

In my writings on the national question I have already said that an abstract presentation of the question of nationalism in general is of no use at all. A distinction must necessarily be made between the nationalism of an oppressor nation and that of an oppressed nation... [W]e, nationals of a big nation, have nearly always been guilty, in historic practice, of an infinite number of cases of violence; furthermore, we commit violence and insult an infinite number of times without noticing it...

And I think that in the present instance, as far as the Georgian nation is concerned, we have a typical case in which a genuinely proletarian attitude makes profound caution, thoughtfulness and a readiness to compromise a matter of necessity for us. The Georgian [Stalin] who is neglectful of this aspect of the question, or who carelessly flings about accusations of 'nationalist-socialism' (whereas he himself is a real and true 'nationalist-socialist', and even a vulgar Great-Russian bully), violates, in substance, the interests of proletarian class solidarity, for nothing holds up the development and strengthening of proletarian class solidarity so much as national injustice...

It would be unpardonable opportunism if, on the eve of debut of the East, just as it is awakening, we undermined our prestige with its peoples, even if only by the slightest crudity or injustice towards our own non-Russian nationalities. The need to rally against the imperialists of the West, who are defending the capitalist world, is one thing. There can be no doubt about that and it would be superfluous for me to speak about my unconditional approval of it. It is another thing when we ourselves lapse... into imperialist attitudes towards oppressed nationalities, thus undermining all our principled sincerity, all our principled defence of the struggle against imperialism. But the morrow



of world history will be a day when the awakening peoples oppressed by imperialism are finally aroused and the decisive long and hard struggle for their liberation begins.” (Lenin 1922)

Lenin’s own authoritarianism undoubtedly played a role in enabling Stalin’s rise to power (Blank 1990), but they were implacably opposed to each other on the issues of national liberation of Russia’s colonies and the rights of ethnic minorities. Sultan-Galiev had good reason to believe that Lenin would have protected him – and, indeed, all the other Bolsheviks who supported what was then called ‘national self-determination’ – from expulsion and persecution. Lenin’s illness and death allowed Stalin to reverse his policies on the national and colonial question. ‘Great-Russian chauvinism’ was redefined as ‘internationalism,’ support for self-determination as counter-revolutionary ‘nationalist socialism’, and Bolsheviks who argued for the latter were liquidated. Subsequently, whole peoples – for example the Ukrainian and Muslim nations – were subjected to what Raphael Lemkin (1953) called ‘genocide’ for failing to accept ethnic Russian supremacism, while the secret protocols of Stalin’s pact with Hitler in 1939 allowed him to re-colonise part of Poland and the Baltic republics.

### **A forerunner of underdevelopment theory and the Non-Aligned Movement**

After his show-trial, Sultan-Galiev was released but kept under constant surveillance. He knew his writings and activities therefore had to be clandestine. This whole experience led him to reconsider his core beliefs:

“Communism, according to my analysis and a new understanding, was pictured to me as a new and progressive form of European nationalism..., meaning the policy of consolidation and unification of the material and cultural forces of the metropolitan countries under the aegis of the proletariat... According to my theory of imperialism, imperialism is inherent in capitalism in general, regardless of the stage of its development... From my formulation, therefore, there was a possibility in the theory and practice of the existence of socialist or communist imperialism, since at this stage of its development international capital (which must grow from a revolution into socialism) represents a system of colonial management.

I here ask you not to confuse my concept with the battered and rotten lampoon of Kautsky and the dirty lies of the imperialist bourgeoisie about the ‘red imperialism of the Soviets.’ From my same theses, you will see that I am an irreconcilable enemy both of the world bourgeoisie and Menshevism.” (Sultan-Galiev 1923-25)

His formulation, which assumed that Russia and the Comintern remained proletarian and communist, was certainly confused, but so was Trotsky’s characterisation of Soviet Russia as a ‘degenerated workers’ state’. What is more significant is that his analysis was one of the earliest from the left that designated Soviet Russia as capitalist and imperialist. Raya Dunayevskaya (1941) and C.L.R. James (1986[1950], 6-11) came to the same conclusion on the basis of a more rigorous Marxist analysis, while of course rejecting the notion that Soviet Russia was in any sense proletarian, socialist or communist.

Sultan-Galiev’s unfinished draft document divides the world into two camps: 20-25% of the world’s population constituting the colonisers and imperialists, and the rest constituting the colonised, including the aboriginal peoples of the Americas and Australia. He characterises the relation of ‘the peoples of the West (metropolitan countries) to the peoples of the colonies and semi-colonies’ as one of ‘slave-holding’. By this point one gets the impression, strengthened later, that ‘the West’ includes Russia. He doesn’t deny class oppression in the metropolitan countries but says that ‘the people of the West extended their system of intra-national slavery (if serfdom in the epoch of feudalism was a

form of slave-owning economy, then class oppression in the era of capitalism is also slave-owning - the exploitation of man by man, but only in another, reformed form) entirely to their colonies - ...thus giving an international character to it and transformed it into an "international" system of slavery.' He continues,

"In the hands of the metropolitan countries with some 300-350 million people has accumulated all the main means of production (factory industry), means of circulation (financial capital and its apparatus), ways and means of transportation and communication (sea routes, railway lines, air messages, telegraph and radiograph); as well as sources of raw materials (oil, coal, ore, animals and plant products) and markets for industrial products. In this respect, the West seems to be a giant octopus, embracing with its tentacles four-fifths of humanity and sucking from it all its vital juices. To this we must add that the octopus is not an ordinary octopus from under the waters of the ocean, but an octopus-armadillo... armed with the latest military art and military "inventions" of the West..."

However, he continues, colonisation is not simply an extension of monopoly capitalism to the colonies and semi-colonies but something much worse: a deliberate 'delay of the development of the domestic productive forces of the latter,' 'suppression of the growth of their material culture,' 'preservation of the agrarian, purely peasant character of these countries,' and 'the absence or underdevelopment of national industry'. All this is aimed at securing sources of cheap raw materials and captive markets for the industry of the metropolitan countries and is an inherently conflict-ridden process, requiring the brutal suppression of independence movements in the colonies as well as competitive wars between metropolitan countries. He is scathing about the irrational and wasteful nature of this world economy:

For example, some wool or leather raw materials from Tibet, India or Afghanistan should get to the UK, turn into cloth, shoes or other goods and then travel back to their "homeland." Or, for example, Turkestan or Transcaucasian cotton (by the way, together with the Baku oil) must first make a trip to the country of the "civilized" - somewhere in Moscow or Ivanovo-Voznesensk and, turning into a manufactory or something else, to do the opposite (secondary) journey to the same Turkestan or Transcaucasia, and sometimes further - to Persia, Afghanistan, etc...

The waste of mass human energy for the constant and regular "protection" of the existing order of things and the structure it requires, in other words, the existing irrationality in the organization of the world economy and the relevance of this social negligence (injustice)... expresses itself in the rabid militarism of the West, in the monstrous growth of its land, sea, and air armaments and the corps of internal and external guards. The peoples of the West are protected not only from the oppressed peoples of the colonies and semi-colonies and from all sorts of "yellow," "black" and other "dangers" and "panisms," but also "from each other."

Here we get confirmation that Russia is seen as part of 'the West' or 'the metropolitan countries,' its colonies no different from Tibet, India or Afghanistan. This is borne out as he proceeds:

We will not dwell in more detail on the movement of Egypt, Morocco and other African or Asian colonies of the West, because these are well known in their basic features. Here we will highlight the movement of the colonial peoples of Russia. We note that the liberation movement in the colonies of Russia (Turkestan, the Caucasus, Ukraine, the Crimea, Belarus, the Turkic-Finnish and Mongolian peoples) is evident. If the defeat of tsarist Russia by Japan in 1904, which caused the revolution of 1905, contributed to the awakening of national self-consciousness of the colonial, oppressed peoples of this country, its defeat on the Western and Caucasian fronts in the world war that caused the revolution of 1917 only deepened the process of the liberation movements of these peoples. The facts of the separation of Poland, Finland and the small Baltic states from Russia; the facts of the



emergence of the Tatar, Bashkir, Kirghiz, Central Asian, Transcaucasian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian and other republics, as well as a dozen autonomous national regions, systematically fighting for the expansion of sovereignty rights, eloquently confirm this position...

By establishing the USSR, the pan-Russians would like to restore, in fact, a single, indivisible Russia, the hegemony of the Great Russians over other peoples...

The former Russia, which was restored under the present form of the USSR, will not last long. It is transitory and temporary...

All this is remarkably prophetic, prefiguring the emergence of theories of underdevelopment and neo-colonialism as well as the disintegration of the USSR in 1991. It is also innovative, and we can learn from it even today. Instead of the First, Second and Third Worlds, where the Second World (the Soviet Union) encompasses both the imperial metropolis and its colonies; instead of the 'Global South,' which excludes Russian colonies; there is a simple two-fold division between imperialist countries and colonies.

The practical part of Sultan-Galiev's theses counterposed the national liberation of colonies to the Bolshevik formula of self-determination and counterposed an 'International of the Colonial Peoples' to the Communist International. His comrade Yunus Validov, who was expelled from the party, as well as other comrades 'questioned the correctness of the basic slogan of "colonial dictatorship over the metropole,"' which indeed conflicts even with Sultan-Galiev's own observations on authoritarianism in the colonies and their economic backwardness as a result of underdevelopment. During intensive discussions between Validov and Sultan-Galiev, they decided that the social base of their International would be workers, peasants and the petty bourgeoisie, and a tactical alliance with the progressive section of the national industrial bourgeoisie. Their headquarters would be in one of the Eastern countries. Validov would contact Sun Yat-sen in China and the independence movement in India, Sultan-Galiev himself would organise a small but strong nucleus within the USSR. The death of Validov put an end to these plans, but Sultan-Galiev continued to puzzle over the conundrum of the relationship of national liberation to communism, showing that he had not abandoned the goal of a communist society.

Decades later, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) formed something similar to an 'International of Colonial Peoples'. The first summit of the NAM was convened in Belgrade by Jawaharlal Nehru of India, Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, Sukarno of Indonesia and Josip Broz Tito of Yugoslavia in 1961. The leading role played by Tito, who had resisted Stalin's efforts to dominate Yugoslavia, indicated that in principle the NAM was open to Central and East European countries too. Opposed to alliances with either of the imperialist blocs and all forms of colonialism and imperialism, the third NAM summit in Lusaka reaffirmed support for the 'national independence and full sovereignty of all nations on a basis of equality,' as well as disarmament and world peace. It explained that the policy of non-alignment was 'the product of the world anti-colonial revolution and of the emergence of a large number of newly-liberated countries'. Pledging 'their utmost possible moral, political and material support to national liberation movements,' the conference condemned Western support to apartheid South Africa, expressed solidarity with the people of Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau in their struggle against Portugal, and full support to the heroic struggle of the people of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos for freedom and independence while condemning the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union (Resolutions of the Third Conference of Non-Aligned States 1970).

## Conclusion

The persecution and execution of Sultan-Galiev was a disaster for himself and his family, but it was also an enormous loss to socialists everywhere. Even in his bitterness and disillusionment post-1923, he remained a visionary, prefiguring theories of underdevelopment and neocolonialism and the foundation of the NAM. He even went beyond them in recognising the colonial relationship between Soviet Russia and the former Tsarist colonies, which was invisible to most anti-imperialists until after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991; indeed, to this day there are socialists who fail to acknowledge this relationship. Had his writings been more widely accessible, for example, there would have been immediate recognition that the Russian invasion of Ukraine constituted an attack on a former colony by an imperial power.

His earlier writings and activities too are in need of popularisation, including his insistence that a world socialist revolution cannot be achieved unless the working people of colonies and semi-colonies participate actively in it. He was tackling a question which no one, from Marx and Engels onwards, had answered satisfactorily: what should socialists be doing in a colony where only a small minority of working people are proletarians? If a socialist revolution can be made only by the whole proletariat when it constitutes the vast majority of working people, as Marx and Engels believed, what kind of revolution is possible in these countries? It is possible that if Sultan-Galiev and his like-minded comrades had remained in the party and been free to put forward their views for debate instead of being silenced and slaughtered, they might have moved towards advocating a revolution against imperialism and pre-capitalist elites accompanied by the establishment of a democratic republic ('the last form of the bourgeois state' in which 'the class struggle has to be fought out to a conclusion' according to Marx (1875)), in which the working class, as it emerged, would have the freedom to organise and fight against capitalist as well as other forms of oppression.

His insights on strategies to win over a population deeply immersed in a religious culture by combating fundamentalist clerics and other leaders while supporting those propagating secular and democratic interpretations of the religion are also very relevant. He was tackling a problem that plagues us even today: how to fight against Muslim fundamentalism and political Islamism while also combating anti-Muslim bigotry. His attention was concentrated on Islam, but around the world we see regressive, fundamentalist versions of all religions gaining strength and engaging in brutal oppression of religious minorities (including atheists and agnostics), women and girls, and LGBT+ people, and his strategies make sense in combating them all. Taken as a whole, his work was, as Hamziç (2015, 11) observes, marked by its '*avant-garde* awareness of religious, cultural and racial connotations of class struggle in colonial and post-colonial contexts,' which would today be identified as intersectionality.

1923 marked a watershed in Russian history. It has been established that the stamping out of *Sultangalievism* was organised by Stalin, but he couldn't have succeeded without the collusion of almost all the top leaders of the party. The role played by Trotsky was especially disturbing. Lenin had entrusted him with the task of combating Stalin in the Georgian affair (Lewin 1968, 99), so he knew that in any clash between the nationalism of oppressed nations and the nationalism of an oppressor nation, Lenin would side with the former. Sultan-Galiev had sent him an extra copy of 'Who am I?' in which he refuted all the charges against himself. And he would have known that at the Twelfth Party Congress Sultan-Galiev was arguing not for the break-up of the union but for more equal relationships between Russia and its former colonies. He should have realised that Sultan-Galiev was no counter-revolutionary, opposed his expulsion and persuaded the rest of the Central Committee to do so as well. The fact that he did not puts a question mark over his understanding of imperialism and national liberation. Debating this issue with Sultan-Galiev within the party would undoubtedly have been more fruitful than expelling and silencing him.

Even after Sultan-Galiev was cleared of all charges and rehabilitated under Gorbachev, he has continued to be sidelined. A hundred years after he was subjected to a fate he experienced as the utmost cruelty, very little material by or about him is widely available. Much of what is available is distorted by Stalin's advocates and apologists, or by Cold Warriors from the other side of the iron fence who use Sultan-Galiev for their own purposes. A well-researched biography and comprehensive collection of his works in translation would be invaluable aids to making the most of his legacy.

**Rohini Hensman**

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<https://logosjournal.com/2023/mirsaid-sultan-galiev-the-pioneering-bolshevik-theorist-of-imperialism-national-liberation-and-socialism/>

• Rohini Hensman is a writer, independent scholar and activist who comes from Sri Lanka and is based in India. She works on workers' rights, feminism, minority rights, globalization and democracy movements, and has been published extensively on these issues. Her most recent books are [Workers, Unions, and Global Capitalism: lessons from India](#) and [Indefensible: Democracy, Counter-Revolution, and the Rhetoric of Anti-Imperialism](#).