

RED CENTURY

What Killed the Promise of Muslim Communism?

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LONDON — For a brief moment after the Bolshevik uprisings of 1917, it looked like revolution might be waged across vast swaths of the world under the joint banner of Communism and Islam.

Pan-Islam had emerged in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire, with the efforts of Sultan Abdulhamid II to lay claim to the title of caliph among Muslims. New forms of Islamic schooling and associations began to emerge across the Arab world and beyond. From Egypt and Iraq to India and the Indonesian archipelago, Islam became a rallying call against European colonialism and imperialism.

Islam's mobilizing power attracted Communist activists in the 1910s and 1920s. The Bolsheviks, who lacked organizational infrastructure in the vast Muslim lands of the former Russian empire, allied with Islamic reformers in those areas. They created a special Commissariat for Muslim Affairs under the Tatar Bolshevik Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, promising to establish a distinctive "Muslim Communism" across the Caucasus and Central Asia. During the 1920 Congress of the Peoples of the East in Baku, in what is today Azerbaijan, the Comintern chairman Grigory Zinoviev, a Ukrainian Jew, called for waging a "holy war" against Western imperialism.

But as we now know, Communism and Islam failed to coalesce into a lasting alliance. By the onset of the Cold War, they seemed irrevocably opposed. Differing views about Communism divided Muslims across Asia, Africa and the Middle East in their struggles for independence and emancipation during the second half of the 20th century. An anti-Communist jihad fundamentally remade Afghanistan in the 1980s and helped set the stage for the rise of Al Qaeda and the emergence of a new form of Islamist terrorism.

Yet around the time of the Russian Revolution, the prospects of Communism and Islam joining forces seemed very bright. They were perhaps no brighter than in the Indonesian archipelago, then under Dutch rule: In 1918-21, left-wing labor organizers working hand in glove with Islamic scholars and pious Muslim merchants built the biggest mass movement in Southeast Asia.

Over the preceding decade, Indonesian labor activists had already established a strong union representing workers on the extensive railroad network servicing the vast plantation economy of Java and Sumatra. By 1914, the Indische Sociaal-Democratische