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THE POLICY OF ELIMINATING ILLITERACY IN SURKHANDARYA DISTRICT IN THE 1920s–1930s AND ITS IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSIONS

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the processes of eliminating illiteracy, improving general literacy among the population, and establishing the activities of cultural and educational institutions in Surkhandarya District in the 1920s–1930s. Alongside the social significance of the educational initiatives implemented by the Soviet authorities, the article also explores their ideological dimensions, particularly their role in disseminating communist ideology, shaping public consciousness in accordance with new political requirements, and transforming attitudes toward local cultural heritage. Literacy courses, evening schools, red teahouses, and clubs operating in Surkhandarya District are examined on the basis of historical evidence.

KEYWORDS

Surkhandarya District, Soviet authorities, elimination of illiteracy, communist ideology, cultural revolution, public education, evening school, literacy.

Introduction

The 1920s–1930s were a period of profound changes in the social and cultural life of Uzbekistan. The reorganization of education, improvement of literacy among the population, and expansion of the school network became important priorities of Soviet state policy. These processes unfolded differently across regions with varying levels of socioeconomic development. In Surkhandarya District, too, extensive measures were undertaken to eliminate illiteracy.

The Soviet authorities viewed the development of public education not only as a means of improving people's educational attainment but also as a way of consolidating the new political system. Education was intended to instill the perceived advantages of socialist society in the younger generation, cultivate a communist worldview, and broaden the social support base of Soviet rule. Consequently, the campaign to eliminate illiteracy was closely intertwined with political propaganda and ideological education.

Soviet-era propaganda portrayed the population of pre-revolutionary Turkestan and the Emirate of Bukhara as illiterate and excluded from cultural progress. The Soviet authorities' educational activities, in turn, were presented as a historic transformation that had overcome the shortcomings of the previous era. This approach led to a one-sided assessment of local educational traditions, including the activities of religious schools and madrasas.

The purpose of this article is to historically analyze the implementation of the policy of eliminating illiteracy in Surkhandarya District in the 1920s–1930s, its outcomes, and its ideological characteristics. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between practical measures aimed at improving literacy and the ideological policies of the Soviet regime.

Results

In the 1920s–1930s, the Soviet authorities identified the improvement of literacy among the population as a major component of the cultural revolution. Literacy courses, primary schools, and evening educational institutions were established to teach reading and writing to people of different ages. These measures were particularly intended to reach poor and working-class groups who had previously lacked regular access to education.

Considerable importance was also attached to explaining the social achievements of the new political system to the population during the campaign to eliminate illiteracy. Propaganda materials associated educational changes with the name of V. I. Lenin and the interests of the proletariat. Thus, learning to read and write was presented not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but also as a process of embracing Soviet political ideas.

The decisions adopted in 1930 concerning the introduction of universal primary education gave new impetus to efforts to eliminate illiteracy. According to the information presented, the literacy rate in Uzbekistan had reached approximately 79 percent by this period. However, without clarifying which age groups and population categories were included in this figure, caution is necessary before accepting it as a comprehensive indicator of literacy among the entire population.

Efforts to improve literacy were also carried out systematically in Surkhandarya District. Enrolling the working-age population in literacy courses, expanding primary education, and establishing new schools became important components of local educational policy.

During the 1930–1931 academic year, 116 pupils graduated from five primary schools in Termez. In the same academic year, 32 students attended two evening schools in the city. These figures indicate that, alongside regular school education, alternative forms of instruction were also used to educate people whose circumstances limited their ability to attend daytime classes.

The campaign to eliminate illiteracy was not confined to schools and courses. The Soviet authorities also sought to use cultural venues familiar to the population for political and educational purposes. Traditional teahouses were repurposed, and so-called “red teahouses” were established on their basis. These institutions served as venues for explaining Soviet policies, organizing discussions on political issues, and distributing propaganda materials.

“Red clubs” also functioned as an important component of the ideological education system. These institutions were supplied with the works of Marx and Lenin, literature glorifying the Soviet system, and materials on political topics. According to the information presented, Russian-language publications occupied a significant place in their libraries, while local-language literature and works related to ancestral heritage were difficult to obtain.

This situation demonstrates that cultural and educational institutions operated along two distinct but interconnected lines. On the one hand, they helped develop reading habits and created opportunities for collective interaction. On the other hand, the predominance of ideological criteria in selecting literature and determining propaganda content restricted opportunities to present local historical and cultural heritage.

Komsomol organizations and local young people also played an important role in efforts to improve literacy. They worked to engage different segments of the population in learning, organize literacy classes, and provide assistance with everyday agricultural tasks.

According to the information presented, Fayzulla Sufiyev, a resident of Xatak village in Sherabad District, helped approximately 800 people acquire basic literacy between 1932 and 1936. His activities demonstrate the importance of local initiative and individual commitment in the campaign to eliminate illiteracy.

It is also reported that the Komsomol youth working under F. Sufiyev assisted local residents with cutting mulberry branches during the silkworm-rearing season. Under the conditions of collectivization and famine, many families faced shortages of labor resources. In some households, the absence of adults who had gone to work in the fields made it difficult to carry out routine agricultural tasks. In these circumstances, assistance from local young people helped meet practical needs in village life.

This example demonstrates that it is insufficient to assess the campaign to eliminate illiteracy solely as the outcome of central government decisions. The participation of local activists, young people, and community representatives also played a certain role in implementing these initiatives at the regional level.

Discussion

The policy of eliminating illiteracy in Surkhandarya District was implemented at the intersection of social and educational needs and the ideological objectives of the Soviet authorities. On the one hand, literacy courses and evening schools helped develop reading and writing skills and expand access to education. On the other hand, educational content and the activities of cultural institutions were adapted to the requirements of communist ideology.

The concept of the “cultural revolution” promoted by the Soviet authorities envisaged not only the expansion of the educational system but also the reshaping of society's attitudes toward historical memory and cultural values. Portraying the pre-revolutionary period as one of absolute illiteracy and cultural backwardness represented a one-sided approach that failed to fully reflect the existing educational practices of local communities. Therefore, claims made in Soviet-era propaganda should not be accepted as comprehensive conclusions encompassing every aspect of historical reality when assessing the growth of literacy.

The effectiveness of measures to eliminate illiteracy was also associated with regional socioeconomic conditions, the availability of teachers and school buildings, and the population's way of life. Since these factors varied across Surkhandarya District, literacy initiatives may likewise have progressed at different rates in different localities.

The activities of red teahouses and clubs, together with the predominance of politically oriented literature, reveal the ideological dimension of educational and cultural outreach. However, explaining the existence of these institutions solely in terms of propaganda would also be one-sided. In some localities, they provided spaces for public interaction and participation in cultural activities. The historical significance of these institutions lies precisely in the interrelationship between these two aspects.

Conclusion

In the 1920s–1930s, the elimination of illiteracy in Surkhandarya District became one of the major priorities of Soviet educational policy. The activities of primary and evening schools, literacy courses, red teahouses, and clubs brought about certain changes in the educational and cultural life of the population. The participation of local young people and activists was also important in implementing measures to improve literacy.

At the same time, educational activities were closely linked to the dissemination of communist ideology, the promotion of the perceived advantages of the Soviet system, and the interpretation of historical and cultural heritage according to new political criteria. Although educational and cultural institutions expanded opportunities for acquiring knowledge, their activities and content were often constrained by party requirements.

Therefore, a historical assessment of the campaign to eliminate illiteracy in Surkhandarya District must consider both its educational and social outcomes and its ideological limitations. Such an approach makes it possible to gain a deeper understanding of the complex and contradictory nature of Soviet educational policy.

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