



# Exploring the History of Central Asia, Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy: The Bright Path Illuminated by the Enlightenment

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**Abstract:** The article talks about the life and multifaceted activities of Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy, a faithful son of the Uzbek people, the father of the Turkestan Jadid movement, a legal scholar, a great enlightener and intellectual, who sacrificed his life in the struggle for independence of the nation. The life of the great reformer Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy, the genius of human intellect, was extremely difficult and full of contradictions like the turbulent period of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hundred years after Behbudiy's tragic death, his life serves as an exemplary lesson for the young people of present days. The social life of Turkestan in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is highlighted with the rise of new movement that was destined to play an important role in the region's political processes. The movement called "Jadidism" (from the Arabic word "Jadid" for 'new'), united the most progressive thinking intellectuals of the region. Jadidism, having originated as a movement of social thought and initially limited by the framework of ideas aimed at reforming school education, went through a difficult path of development, reaching the point of turning into a powerful political movement with definite political requirements of the national-state self-government of Turkestan. This evolution of the Jadidism movement in Turkestan had become possible due the great contribution of Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy and his multi-faceted work. On the onset of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the pursuit for the national development, enlightenment and education, the Turkestani Jadidists – Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy, Abdulla Avloniy, Munawwar Qori, Abdullah Qodiriy, and many others – realized that in the existing state of colonial exclusion, separated and dispersed rebellions, prevalent ignorance and intolerance, the society's advancement would not be possible to achieve nor there would be a hope for the spiritual and national liberation. It is hard to fully appreciate the merits of Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy in the creation of new-method Jadid schools, in the formation and development of the national press, publishing, librarianship, dramaturgy and theatrical art. The name of Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy, who spared his life in the struggle for the independence and freedom of the nation, was unjustly forgotten and blown away by the social and political storms of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the modern age of independence, the Republic of Uzbekistan puts emphasis and efforts on restoration of the good name of the great son of the Uzbek people.

**Keywords:** Jadidism, Enlightenment, Independence, Autonomy, Reforms, The New Method School, Newspaper, Magazine

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## 1. Exploring the History of Central Asia

Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy: The Bright Path Illuminated by the Enlightenment

The fine touch to the portrait of the outstanding thinker and fighter for independence Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy

*In front of you is the portrait of a man dressed in national costume. The glance of this man looking through his eyeglasses is curious; his eyes are soulful and sad. He wears*

*a white turban on his head. His shirt has a stand-up collar. Nowadays, there are few people who dress this way – modest yet elegant. However, appearances can be deceiving. In front of you is a giant, enlightener, reformer and a fighter for independence Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy, dubbed "the father of Uzbek Jadidids" by Academician Naim Karimov, Academy of Science of the Republic of Uzbekistan. [1]*

National Encyclopedia of Uzbekistan underpins the title. [2]

## 2. Central Asia in Twentieth Century: Wind of Change

A French writer Albert Camus once said that “a true generosity towards the future is in giving everything to the present”. The person in the portrait belonged to that rare at all times type who puts interests of the people above their own. Throughout his honorable life he carried his love to the long-suffering and hardworking folk. He devoted his brilliant mind, huge talent, and truly encyclopedic level of knowledge to liberate the people from physical and spiritual chains binding them, to lift them up from their knees, to help them ensure the bright future and to take a dignified place in an international arena.

A Chinese poet and artist Ten Nun once wisely said “when drawing a branch one needs to hear the sound of the wind”. Behbudiy lived at the turn of the XIX and XX centuries, a time when wind of change was blowing through Europe and Asia particularly strong. Hegel, a Germany philosopher, once noted that the truth makes its way for itself when its time has come, and not earlier. Everything foreshadowed the imminent decline of the dilapidated structure of the tsarist empire and the feudal system in the Bukhara Emirate and Khiva Khanate.

At that very time the bright star of this man shone the Central Asian skyline. That was the man about whom in 1926 the lead orientalist L. Azizzoda said “if any other figure than Ali-Sher Navoiy or Ulugbek should be immortalized in Uzbekistan, that should be no one else, but Behbudiy”. These words righteously rank Behbudiy among the greatest thinkers and humanists of the East.

It deem appropriate to cite an excerpt from the confidential report by the French intelligence officer Major La Costa, an expert on the activities of the political parties of Turkestan, returned to his homeland in 1906: “In the Turkestan region, the most influential and promising political force is neither the Social Democrats (Bolsheviks and Mensheviks) or the Social Revolutionaries (SRs), or the Cadets and Liberals, but the Uzbek Jadids.” [3]

Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy was the founder and father of the Jadidism movement in Turkestan, which at first set educational goals, and then transformed into political ones. Together with other prominent Jadidists, Behbudiy aspired and led the national liberation movement in Turkestan in the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. To the regret of its disciples, the movement was ruthlessly suppressed and destroyed by the Emir of Bukhara, which was followed by the Red Terror.

## 3. Biography

Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy was born on January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1875, to a family of hereditary clergymen in kishlak Bakshi-tepa (“kishlak” – a rural settlement of semi-nomadic Turkic peoples of Central Asia), not far from Samarkand. His father was an influential expert in Islamic jurisprudence and his grandfather was an imam. Their lineage traced roots to a famous Turkic poet and Sufi Akhmad Yassawi (1093-1166).

After the death of his father, Behbudiy was brought up by his uncle from the maternal side. Under uncle’s guidance, Behbudiy learnt Arabic and Persian languages. [4]

At the age of 15, Behbudiy moved to his paternal uncle’s house who taught him the grammar of Arabic language, mathematics, fundamentals of jurisprudence, logic and philosophy. Since the early age Behbudiy received both theological and secular education.

Behbudiy studied in madrasahs in Samarkand and then Bukhara as well. He began his professional life working as a *mirza* (clerk) in the court administration. This job was an excellent opportunity to learn more about the people from different layers of the society and to practice his knowledge and refine the skills. Upon passing the exams in jurisprudence with concentration in inheritance rights Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy gets a *Mufti* degree (a jurist in Islamic law).

Working in the court administration «he couldn’t help being compassionate to people’s grief and he was able to form the framework of the socio-political, religious, legal basis and economic systems of the Russian Turkestan». [5]

In 1899, Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy performed his first Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca).

The trip widened his worldview and the understanding of the world. The route included cities of Russia, the Crimea, Iran, Turkey and Egypt. Not only did he study the lifestyles of various countries, but he also studied their approaches to enlightenment by obtaining books on related subjects, textbooks and syllabi, newspapers and magazines and by studying new methods of pedagogy. Later, he broadly used all collected materials in the great mission of enlightenment.

In 1903–1904, Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy lived St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kazan, Orenburg, Crimea. After that, he is actively working on the humanitarian reformation of society. The Russian experience, and the enlightenment approach by the Crimean Tatars in particular as well as his acquaintance and cooperation with Ismail Gasprinsky, the outstanding enlightener and a founder of Jadidism, make his intentions definite and make him aim to the accomplishment of the plan of the humanitarian reconstruction of the society. [5]

Behbudiy met with Ismail Gasprinsky in 1893, when the Crimean Tatar intellectual and educator was travelling in Samarkand and Bukhara by the invite from Emir Alim Khan (Said Mir Muhammad Alim Khan, 1880-1944). Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy and Ismail Gasprinsky established a secular school “*Usuliy Jajid*” (New Method School of Jadids) in Bukhara. Later, the school was expanded as a network with the similar schools in Samarkand, Kokand, Tashkent and Andijan. The school network eventually became a “birthplace” of future Jadidists.

In 1908 Behbudiy started his campaign for the establishment of private newspapers and magazines, which succeeded only in 1913. Behbudiy’s newspaper “*Samarkand*” commences on April 6. A few months later, Behbudiy’s print issues first journal “*Oyina*” (“Mirror”) [6].

In his diverse activities, Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy pays

great attention to the foundation of primary and secondary school education, the preparation of textbooks, the development of national drama and theatrical art, the organization of a network of libraries, publishing houses, and journalism occupies a special place in his activities.

#### 4. Jadids: Joining the Movement

From its inception, Jadidism objectively opposed the fundamental foundations of feudalism and colonialism. Contrary to traditional Islam, the Jadid movement sought to change some of the outdated laws of the Muslim faith, adapting the religion to the tasks of spiritual and economic progress.

The need to free the local market from the existing obstacles inevitably led to slogans of national and social liberation, including the necessity to transit to the nation's self-governance as a priority, the establishment of a national press, and the protection of the rights of the indigenous population. [7].

The most important impetus for the emergence and development of Jadidism in Turkestan was two factors:

- 1) internal factor: colonial and anti-national policy of tsarism pursued in the region;
- 2) external factor: reform processes taking place in that period in Turkey, Egypt and other countries of the Near and Middle East. [8]

By that time there is an increase of the progress supporters in Turkestan. These were the people who sincerely wished seeing their compatriots living in abundance and being free. They hoped that they would become as enlightened as people living in the developed world. They protested not only against the tsarist regime, but also against the some ignorant of the clergy who rejected any progress and who clung to traditions using the purity of Islam as their justification. One could meet the supporters of the progress among the believers, the forming layer of bourgeoisie, farmers, craftsmen-all layers of the society. They were seeking for the primary basis of the national identity in the enlightenment and science.

Breaking the resistance of the traditionalists these selfless patriot-enlighteners began opening the new method schools, that unlike the traditional schools that taught only religious subjects, were teaching secular subjects as well.

Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy joins the movement and takes a fervent participation in the opening of the new method schools. He opened one of these schools at his own house. He wrote such textbooks as *Risolai Asbobi Savod (ABC Book)*, *Risolai Zhugrofiyai Umroniy (The Geography Textbook)*, *Tarahi Islom (History of Islam)*, *Kitobat ul-atfol (The Upbringing Textbook)* and other textbooks.

From now on the fight for the rise of the national identity and awareness becomes his life work. "Anyone willing to seek the truth is tremendously strong already,"-once noted Dostoevsky. Soon Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy become the flag bearer of this fight in Turkestan. More and more like-minded people rally around his persona.

#### 5. Jadids Press: From Enlightenment to Political Movement

All this time he relentlessly works on increasing his knowledge. He has a wide field of interests that includes theology, history, philosophy, pedagogy, sociology, ethnography-all the specter of sciences called social sciences. Later one of his comrades Fayzulla Khodjaev would say, that no other Jadid in Turkestan could compete with this great persona in the breadth of knowledge.

Being a person with the analytical mind, Behbudiy had a rare gift of theoretical thinking. He wrote hundreds of books, newspaper and journal articles. The motherland, its faith and history, the freedom fight, service to the national interests, fight with obsolete traditions, enlightenment of the people, the critics of autocracy in the Bukhara Emirate were in the main focus of his writing.

He realized that in order to unite the people into one nation one should not only open the new method school, but also develop the nationalist newspapers and theater. In 1913 he established a newspaper called *Samarkand*, and in August of the same year another one «...журнал Ойина» the journal *Oyina (The Mirror)*, that were published and circulated (кроме Туркестана – III.M.) in Tatarstan, on the Caucasus, in Iran, Afghanistan, India and Turkey.

Behbudiy organized a special publishing house *Nashriyoti Behbudiya (The Publishing House of Behbudiy)* that also contained a library *Kutubxonai Behbudiya (Library of Behbudiy)* that soon became one of the largest libraries in Central Asia.

"*Samarkand* and *Oyina* played a significant role in the awakening of the national identity of Uzbek people. [9]

However, both the newspaper and the magazine were published only for a short period of time mainly due to pressure of censorship." [10]

By 1917 Jadidism was transformed from the enlightenment movement into a political one.

What is Behbudiy's attitude towards the political situation of Turkestan? He connected the progress of his people not only with the enlightenment, but also with the radical change of its political status, with the acquisition of independence. In his articles he exposed the colonial politics of the Russian tsarism and of the Temporary government and criticized their laws. He was firmly convinced that it is impossible to obtain independence without fight. His famous slogan "rights aren't granted, but fought for..." served as a call to the nation. [11]

Like other Jadids, Behbudiy was a supporter of a peaceful fight with colonization, an opponent of revolution and he believed that one could achieve a lot in the parliamentary fight. Being a passionate adherent of autonomy, he believed that Turkestan could receive independence as a part of the democratic federal Russia and preferred evolutionary methods of achieving progress. Apparently, Behbudiy could feel the pulse of his country better than anyone else and was able to measure its political temperature.

Just like other Jadidids, Behbudiy met the February Revolution with delight and hope. Protection of political, national and economic interests became a priority in Jadidids' activity, and Behbudiy's in particular.

*"We want that all Muslims of Turkestan along with all Russians, Jewish and other ethnic groups to organize their own Turkestani government under the Russian power; we want to have our own United council. In order for all Muslims to live according to the laws of sharia, their own traditions, religious laws. We want to create laws that would be oriented towards the wellbeing of all Muslims, Christians and Jewish people living in Turkestan"*- Behbudiy wrote at that time. He was fighting for the unification of all political powers of supporters of the national movement.

At the same time Behbudiy's attitude towards Bolsheviks was negative. *"For us Muslims joining this group is extremely harmful. Unless some financial paragraphs of their program are changed in accordance with sharia, their thoughts about an individual, a family are changed they are completely unsuitable for us"*-he was telling his supporters.

*Shuroi Islomiya*, a new political council was created in Tashkent in March 1917. Behbudiy played a crucial role in this organization». [12]

However, the party split. The clergy and its supporters left it and formed their own council.

Soon, in October of 1917 the October coup set the national liberation movement in a different direction. In November of 1917 Emergence Congress announced the Turkestan as autonomous unit under the Federal Russian Republic and it was called *Turkestan Muhtoriyati* (Turkestan autonomy). Behbudiy was elected to become a member of the new government. However, Kokand government existed only for 72 days after its destructions by Bolsheviks who stormed it and took over it. The city was burning on fire, there were cannon fires too. Over ten thousand people died within a three-day period.

## 6. Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy's Legacy

Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy died in the prime of his life and talent. He was 45 years old. Not long before his death Behbudiy retired from the political activity and worked in Samarkand branch of the Commissionaire of the People's Education.

In 1919 he was planning on going to another Hadj. On March 25th he crossed the border of the Bukhara Emirate and was captured by the government of the emirate and was ferried in Karshi and eventually executed. It is known that the authorities of the emirate were hostile towards Behbudiy who repeatedly criticized the emir and his entourage.

Until his last breath Behbudiy was devoted to the enlightenment. Before execution, Behbudiy managed to spread the word to his friends urging them to continue developing enlightenment, culture, science and serve the

progress. In his last message to the world, Behbudiy wrote:

*"I bequeath to you: Children of Turkestan may not remain illiterate... Direct them towards the path of Liberty!"* [13]

## 7. Conclusion

Uzbek people believe that the man's life goes on while the memory the man is alive. The names of Behbudiy and his companions are cherished and remembered in their motherland. Their legacy is subject of research of the scholars in Central Asian republics, Germany, Turkey, United States, Japan.

Through social events, scientific research and forums, and promotion in the popular culture, goes the revitalization of Behbudiy's heritage. In recent years, a two-volume collection of works has been published, a museum has been opened in Samarkand, a monument has been erected in Tashkent on the alley of prominent writers, a feature film has been produced, a novel and numerous studies on the life and work of Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy have been published. In year 2020, the great intellectual thinker's life was commemorated and 145th anniversary was widely celebrated in Uzbekistan.

There is a recent movie that was produced at the initiative of the president of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev and that depicts Behbudiy's life, work and aspirations. [17]

The cinema film aims to promote the awareness of Behbudiy's dedication to the spiritual and cultural development of Uzbek nation, and to the fight for the national independence. [18]

The movie's release was followed with another notable event in the public life of modern Uzbekistan – the opening of the museum of Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy in his home city of Samarkand in September of year 2021. [19]

The reconstruction of the historical legacy and architectural monuments in today's Uzbekistan instills confidence in the national spiritual wealth, ensuring that reforms are inevitable and will continue to take place.

The role and contribution of Mahmudkhodja Behbudiy and Jadidists in the social and political reformation of the region have an important place in the formation of the sovereign Uzbekistan. Today's independence is the utmost recognition of Behbudiy's remarkable mind, intellect, and his devotion to the nation.

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