

Episode 43-The Russian Civil War: Enver Pasha and the Basmachi 1921-1923

Hello, I'm Sam Amenn, your nonbinary host, and this is the 43rd episode of the Art of Asymmetrical Warfare. Today we'll be discussing Enver Pasha and the Basmachi.

[Theme song]

Making History

I am back! Sorry for the unexpected hiatus. July was a bit of a tough month, I think for a lot of people, myself included. Thank you for your patience and your continued support. I can say I've used the hiatus well and have a bunch of new things cooking in the oven. I actually posted a reel on Instagram which provides a hint of what's to come, so be sure to follow me on there: @aoawarfare.

Before we can jump into this episode, we have to start with how we can make history, because, my god, is the world a fucking disaster.

Vaccines

I may have gone on a hiatus, but my priorities are the same. Vaccines, vaccines, vaccines. If you haven't gotten one yet, get one. If you got a booster, schedule a new appointment because boosters only help for so long. We are being gaslit by every authority figure into thinking this is over, but it's not. One of my friends works in an office that requires everyone to be work in person, they're not mandating masking, they're not mandating vaccines, they're not mandating isolating once you test positive. Guess what happened this week? Someone got COVID-19, didn't tell anyone, didn't isolate themselves. Now three floors worth of employees have called in sick with COVID-19 including my friend. That's at least twenty people, just because one person got sick and didn't take proper precautions.

Don't take chances. Get your vaccine and booster, mask up, and wash your hands as often as you can.

Abortion

The bastards finally did it. They finally overturned Roe. And the horrors are rolling in. Pregnant people are dying during childbirth because doctors won't save their lives. Sixteen-year-old children are forced to give birth because they're not responsible enough to get an abortion. But apparently they can raise a kid just fine. Or you know Amy Barrett is going to swoop in and take the child for her underground baby adoption scheme she apparently has going on.

Trans men and nonbinary people are being forgotten or scapegoated for this disaster with attacks on trans people on the rise. I mean Florida, fucking Florida, what aren't they doing to

make everyone's life a living hell. It's only going to get worse, especially if the Republicans win in the midterms.

I'm making light of some of this stuff, but it is a rational reaction to be terrified right now. I'm fucking terrified right now. But we're not alone and this fight isn't over.

There are two things we can do right now. First, we can donate, support, and volunteer at abortion clinics, find networks that are supporting people who need abortions, and push our representatives to fight for abortion rights for *everyone*. Not just cisgender women, because abortion rights isn't a cisgender woman's right, it's fucking human right that affects cisgender women, cisgender men, trans women, trans men, nonbinary people, and everyone else on the beautiful gender spectrum.

A great organization to donate to is the National Network of Abortion Funds. You donate to them, and they'll make sure the money makes it to abortion clinics that need the help. They have partnered with over eighty abortion funds across the United States and have a rapid response fund as well to help clinics deal with crises. I am working with a friend on creating an anthology where all proceeds go to this network, so I strongly believe in this organization. Also, don't worry, I'll be sharing info on that anthology as soon as I can.

We also have a list of abortion funds on our website to which you can donate. On August 27th, there was a national initiative called 500ActsForAbortion. If you search that hashtag you'll find hundreds of abortion funds that need support and initiatives fighting for abortion rights and body autonomy. *Believe* me that people on the ground have been preparing for this for decades. We're not alone. This fight isn't over. We all have a part to play.

Second, we can show up during the midterms. Listen, I'm fucking furious at the Democrats and President Biden for not doing more. For not giving a shit, because they don't. It's clear. Between their response to the curbing of abortion rights to their normalization of COVID-19, as if a million plus dead is just how life is sometimes. I'm angry and, honestly, it's going to be really hard to get myself to the polls to vote, but I have to, and you have to, because if we don't, the Republicans are going to win, and they'll pave the way for Trump mark two or that piece of shit DeSantis or that fucker Abbott and then we're really fucked.

So, please, continue to call out the spineless Democrats for not doing more, but then show up at the polls. I'm especially talking to my white people who *need* to vote against white supremacy. The Republicans have tried their best to rig the elections so people of color can't vote, because they know when people of color vote, white supremacists lose. Inversely, that also means they're counting on white people *to* vote for white supremacy. We have to prove them wrong this time. Personally, I don't want any fucking white supremacist to count on me for *anything*, let alone keep them in power. There are so many key races. Pritzker can win his re-election. Stacy Abrams *can* win. Beto O'Rourke *can* fucking win. Charlie Crist, who just picked Karla Hernandez-Mats, leader of one of largest teacher's union, *can* win. But only if we vote.

So, in short, do the work that is going to build a society we want by donating and volunteering with abortion clinics, funds, and networks, call out our representatives to fight for abortion rights, and then go out and vote against white supremacy.

Pakistan

Oh my god, Pakistan is experiencing some of the worst flooding in its history. Last I saw the death count was 1000 with hundreds of thousands of people displaced by these monsoons. They need our help. I've seen people recommend the following organizations as legitimate places to donate:

[Edhi Foundation](#)

[Sahara for Life Trust](#)

[Shahid Afridi Foundation](#)

[Helping Hand for Relief and Development](#)

[Dawn Relief](#)

[Balochistan Youth Action Committee](#)

[Hands Pakistan](#)

<https://images.dawn.com/news/1190743>

We'll provide the links in the description below

Ukraine

The war in Ukraine is still ongoing. It's been six months of war and Ukraine still stands, able to celebrate their independence last week in their capital Kyiv.

We can't abandon them now, not with winter approaching and Russia still determined to wipe Ukraine off the map. There are three ways to support Ukraine:

1. Keep donating to Ukrainians fundraisers and charities. [Pick five from the Ukraine page] Also give World Central Kitchen all the support you can because their people are still on the frontline feeding Ukrainians in need.
2. Call your representatives and tell them to continue to support Ukraine. They still need weapons and supplies.
3. Report and counter any disinformation you see. Ukrainians aren't Nazis, Zelenskyy isn't a Nazi or a puppet of the United States, and this war didn't start because of NATO. This was a war of aggression and imperialism launched by Russia back in 2014 and, for various reasons, he tried to cinch in a massive victory early this year. Because of Ukrainian bravery and the leadership of Zelenskyy's administration, Putin's goals were crushed. With continued support, Putin will lose, and Ukraine will retain its independence.

Syria

Speaking of Russia's wars of aggression, we can't let Syria remain a forgotten war. The civil war is still ongoing, and Russia is still helping their puppet, Assad, murder his own people.

On August 21st, 2013, Assad launched a sarin chemical attack in Ghouta. 1,144 people died and witnesses have been intimidated and tortured into silence. The Syria Campaign is asking people to sign a petition demanding that social media companies fight disinformation about Syria's war crimes, especially its usage of chemical weapons. They've also launched the campaign [Do Not Suffocate Truth](#) which is about collecting and sharing eyewitness accounts to Assad's many war crimes. They've also provided ten ways to support their efforts [to get out the truth](#).

And continue donating to the White Helmets. They've been on the ground since the civil war started, they're not a terrorist group, they're an organization like World Central Kitchen who are trying to help people when no one else will. They need our support.

If we can rally around Ukraine and fight disinformation about the Ukrainian-Russian War, we can rally around Syria and fight disinformation about the Syrian Civil War. If we had rallied around Syria like we did with Ukraine, Ukraine may never have been invaded. It's not too late to stand with both of Russia's victims: Ukraine and Syria.

Afghanistan

While I'm sure everyone loves taking potshots at Russia right, I can't ignore my own country's shitshows and that takes us to Afghanistan. They need our help. They're facing famine, which is exasperated by the war in Ukraine, thousands of refugees still need help, and women are still fighting for their rights.

Right now, we can do three things:

1. Call our representatives and demand they expand the number of Afghan refugees the United States is currently accepting while also increasing the amount of aid we're currently sending to Afghanistan.
 - a. We can support the Afghan people without legitimizing the fucking Taliban because they all "intend to support girls' education" (see quote from Acting Head of UNAMA, Markus Potel). They must actually open the fucking schools and let everyone, girls, boys, and everyone else learn together. The International Rescue Committee, IRC, has [a great email template](#) you can use to send to your reps.
2. Donate to your local resettlement agencies such as IRC, LIRS, USCRI, World Relief, USCCB, and ECDC.
3. Use your social media platforms to lift up the voices of Afghan scholars and the Afghan people. Fight disinformation and don't let people forget that a year ago the United States withdrew from Afghanistan without a concrete plan on how to stabilize Afghanistan. We left the country to crumble and everything that has happened since we withdrew is our responsibility. I mean, we never should have fucking invaded Afghanistan in the first place, but I don't believe we can invade a country for a decade and just leave without a fucking plan and then refuse to take responsibility for the consequences

And now time to talk about a different type of disaster: Enver Pasha and his ill-fated alliance with the Basmachi.

Intro

I know it's been a while, but last time we talked about how Bolshevik General, Mikhail Frunze, entered Central Asia and neutered the Musburo, overthrew both the Khivan and Bukharan Emir, and developed a counter-insurgency strategy to crush the Basmachi.

We also talked about how he encountered four problems with his plan:

1. Frunze, in his efforts to overthrow the Bukharan Emir, woke up the hornet's nest that was the Bukharan Basmachi.
 - a. By threatening Mohammed Alim Khan, he drove an estimated 30,000 volunteers into Basmachi units by the summer of 1920.
2. Frunze left Central Asia in 1920 to fight against the White General Pyotr Wrangel.
 - a. It was now up to the officers Frunze left behind to defeat the Basmachi for good.
3. By eliminating the White armies and the emirs, Frunze limited his number of enemies. This is true, but he also concentrated the survivors under one banner: the Basmachi banner. This, in turn, revitalized the Basmachi enough that they could have been a serious threat to Russian power in the region.
4. Ibrahim-Bek was a talented commander who evaded the Red Army's forces while infiltrated and harassing their rear. By the fall of 1921, he had retaken most of eastern and central Bukhara.

And then Enver Pasha arrived.

Enver Pasha and the Bolsheviks

Enver Pasha started his stormy career in the Ottoman Empire. He was a member of the Committee of Union and Progress, took part in the 1908 Young Turk Revolt that reestablished the Ottoman constitution and parliamentary democracy. He also helped organize the coup that would bring the CUP directly into power, with Enver taking over the Army. Then he pushed the Ottomans into the First World War and was responsible, not only for some of the Ottoman's worst defeats, but also for the Armenian Genocide. So, he was a real bastard. He was so bad the Turkish Court-Martials of 1919-20 found him guilty of "plunging the country into war without a legitimate reason, forced deportation of Armenians and leaving the country without permission" and condemned him to death.

So, when he arrives in Russia in late 1920, he's a bit desperate. He doesn't have many places he can go; he still has these illusions of grandeur that he can take on Mustafa Kemal back in what is now modern-day Turkey and return to power, and he thinks he's a gifted general. The best way to understand Enver is to read this passage from a letter he once wrote, "The other day I read a German book, and one sentence inspired me: "When we can't realize our ideals, we can at least idealize our reality." (Şuhnaz Yilmaz, *An Ottoman Warrior Abroad: Enver Paşa as an Expatriate*, pg. 66)

He actually traveled to Moscow intending to work with the Bolsheviks and he tries, but there is a lot of distrust between the two. He quickly realizes that he doesn't have a place with the Bolsheviks. Their aims are different, and they don't seem very interested in returning him to power in Turkey.

In fact, the Bolsheviks were courting Kemal's government and when forced to choose between Kemal and Enver, they choose Kemal. This is a huge blow for Enver, and he reaches out to Zeki Velidi Toghhan to figure out next steps.

We've met Velidi in our episode on the fathers of the Jadids and we'll learn more about his secret society in an upcoming episode. Velidi was a Bashkir nationalist who helped create an autonomous Bashkir government in 1918 before the Bolsheviks crushed it. He joined the White cause until it became clear they would lose and then sided with the Bolsheviks. However, by 1921 he had grown disillusioned with Communism and was creating secret societies and reaching out to Basmachi leaders. He reached out to Velidi, claiming:

"I have decided that I must go to eastern Bukhara. If we succeed, we shall be victors for the faith. If not, we shall fall as martyrs on the field of battle. We must fight for Turkestan. If we fear the death which fate ordained and prefer to live as dogs, we shall deserve the curses of our forebears and of our descendants alike. But if we have the courage to die for freedom, we shall ensure the freedom and happiness of those who follow us." (Martha Olcott, *The Basmachi or Freeman's Revolt in Turkestan 1918-1924*, Pg 359)

Velidi tried to dissuade him, explaining:

"The Russians are about to wash their hands of external matters. Henceforth they can concentrate all of their resources in Turkestan. Our organization in proportion to its duties, is very weak. This year Turkistan is suffering from a great famine. Ferghana is experiencing a crisis in its attempts to feed the Basmachi. After joining the Basmachi you would want to fight with regular fronts. At present, it is not feasible to keep a standing army larger than five-six thousand strong. It is only possible to conduct guerilla warfare. As for the Basmachi in eastern Bukhara it is not possible to cooperate with them unless agreements are entered into with the Afghans and the Emir...will not allow you to be recognized [as a leader] They will not accept you as such." (H. B. Paksoy, *The Basmachi Movement from Within: An Account of Zeki Velidi Toghhan*, pg. 389-390)

Enver ignored his advice and told the Bolsheviks he wanted to hunt around Bukhara. They let him go, Marx knows why. Once he reaches Bukhara he disappears. Toghhan would later have to flee into the Basmachi's hands as well before fleeing for Afghanistan in 1923

Enver Pasha and the Basmachi

The Basmachi were not enthused to see Enver. In fact, Ibrahim-Bek, who *despised* Enver actually arrested him as a double agent. The Emir Muhammad Alim Khan had to intercede and grant Enver permission to raise an army and fight against the Bolsheviks before Ibrahim released him. At this point, Ibrahim had retaken most of eastern and central Bukhara and made it very clear *he* knew who the enemy was. He told Enver, “I have to make war not just on the Russians, but really against the Jadids.” (Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*, pg. 88)

Enver, however, wasn't interested in local affairs. He wanted to create a massive army that would defeat both the Bolsheviks and the British in India and Afghanistan, uniting the region under the banners of Pan-Turkism. The problem was that Enver's definition of Turkism was heavy on the Ottoman Turkic whereas the Central Asians version of Turkic meant something else entirely. To learn more, please listen to our interview with Adeeb Khalid. It was clear that Enver didn't actually care about the people of Central Asia, the men he was trying to lead, or even the situation on the ground. As Mustafa Cho'qoy wrote:

“Enver, like all Turks in general, know nothing of Turkestan and Bukhara, he had no understanding of the character of their internal events.” (Adeeb Khalid, *Making Uzbekistan*, pg. 150)

He came in making several poorly defined assumptions and didn't adapt when those assumptions were proven very, very wrong. In doing so, he alienated Ibrahim-Bek, who was maybe the Basmachi's best commander, and he eventually alienated the Emirs in Afghanistan. Enver wasn't going to be second fiddle to an Emir hiding in Afghanistan. He was going to be the star which of course angered Emir Muhammed Alim Khan. The Emir withdrew whatever support he was able to offer Enver from Afghanistan, making him reliant on a populace that was growing ambivalent. And yet, he was able to organize three thousand soldiers under his direct command and it is estimated he could coordinate with a total of 16,000 soldiers in the region.

The Enver Paradox

The problem with Enver is that he is a walking contradiction. While he made serious mistakes by alienating Ibrahim and the Bukharan Emir and had no real plan beyond Pan-Turkism and let's repeat what we did during the world war because *that* worked out well, he also drew many intelligent men to his cause like Velidi and former Jadids like Usmon-xoja, cousin to Fayzulla Xojaev who was leading the Bukharan People's Soviet Republic. So, he *was* able to tap into something festering within Bukhara at the time. His reputation as a general during the World War may have also helped with recruitment and he liked to act as if he was a great “war hero.”

The Bolsheviks were certainly worried when they found out he had joined the ranks of the Basmachi. A Soviet official wrote:

“What will be the outcome of this enterprise? From a military point of view, there can be only one opinion, that the large Soviet Federation which knew how to contain the English and the French attack when fighting Denikin, Kolchak and Wrangel, is strong enough to destroy the enterprise of Enver Papa.... It is not the military aspect of this affair which makes us worry, it is more the political aspect... In effect, the past glory of Enver as man of the Muslim state, can still attract crowds of ignorant dehgans in some remote regions

today.” (Şuhnaz Yilmaz, *An Ottoman Warrior Abroad: Enver Paşa as an Expatriate*, Pg 59)

They sent one of their own to Turkestan to assess the situation and found things were dire. This encouraged them to make small concessions to the indigenous people, but nothing like the structural changes Velidi and other Jadids were asking for. Instead, they sent a directive to the central committees of the republics to “cleanse Turkestan, Bukhara, and Khiva of anti-Soviet Turko-Afghan elements” (pg. 149, Adeeb Khalid). These concessions were a tool against the Basmachi, not a policy change. They would be taken away as soon as the Basmachi were defeated.

Enver's Campaigns with the Basmachi

Enver started his campaign with an act of typical bravo. He sent the Soviets an ultimatum:

“In the event of Soviet Russia finding it unnecessary to respect the wishes of the Muslim peoples, who are under the oppressive yoke of dishonest Commissars, and who have sprung to arms to free their territory from the alien power of Moscow, I must warn you Mr. Commissar that two weeks after the handing over of the present memorandum from the supreme council I shall act according to my own judgment.” (Şuhnaz Yilmaz, *An Ottoman Warrior Abroad: Enver Paşa as an Expatriate*, Pg 60)

Of course, the Russians ignored him, and he took Dushanbe in January 1922, including its stock of 120 rifles and two machine guns. He then turned his attention on Baisun, a small, mountain village that sat on the pass between eastern and western Bukhara. It was protected by the 5th Rifle Regiment and was a target appropriate for a regular army unit, not a guerrilla unit. Instead of spreading his forces out, thus forcing the Russians to spread their forces thin, Enver constricted the Basmachi into easy to slaughter units that then charged against the 5th Regiment's machine guns and artillery.

After several days of firing from their garrison, the 5th Regiment created a right column that, utilizing the cover of darkness, marched around Enver's headquarters. Enver, thinking like a regular army general instead of a guerrilla fighter, had his men build trenches in which to defend their headquarters. But the Basmachi didn't have the training to effectively man a trench.

The 5th Regiment surprised the Basmachi by bombarding their position with high explosives and machine gun fire. While Enver's soldiers were being slaughtered, he escaped, his force effectively broken.

Yet, he would continue to fight throughout the summer, trying to rally around a bridgehead at Denau at the end of June, and losing 165 men in the process. In response, the Red Army Commander S. S. Kamenev created the Bukharan Forces Group which included 7,530 men. This was made up of two cavalry brigades, two cavalry squadron, and one rifle division.

Kamenev split his forces into two columns, one to seal the Afghan border and another to chase Enver from the Gissar valley where he was headquartered.

Enver retreated further east and headquartered at Baldzhuan. A three-day battle occurred with the Bolshevik artillery supposedly inflicting 12,000 casualties on the Basmachi.

After the attack, Enver Pasha retreated to a small village near Dushanbe and was caught by a Red Army Bashkir cavalry brigade. Enver either died while charging into machine gun fire or escaped the surprise attack for four days before being cut down by machine gun fire at an ambush at the city of Chaghan. There are even some claims that Enver was cut down during a knife fight with Cavalry Brigade Commander, Yakov Melkumov. He died on August 4th, 1922. When he died, Selim Pasha, his second-in-command wrote to Toghan to suppress the news of his death:

“He said that the Committee must give out that Enver was not dead; simply that he had disappeared. This was necessary in order to keep the movement going; if it were known that Enver were dead it would collapse altogether.” (Şuhnaz Yilmaz, *An Ottoman Warrior Abroad: Enver Paşa as an Expatriate*, pg. 61)

The Russians would not realize he was dead until October 1922 and the British would believe he was alive until 1923, wondering if they should support his cause if they *could* confirm he was still alive. When Enver died, the Basmachi's forces stood at approximately 4,000 soldiers.

Why did Enver Fail?

When Enver arrived in Turkestan, the Basmachi had approximately 17,000 soldiers, had reclaimed eastern and central Bukhara, were supported by the Bukharan Emir in Afghanistan, and gathering everyone who hated the Bolsheviks to their cause. When Enver died, the Basmachi were shattered, their forces numbering a few thousand, the Emir's influence non-existent, and the indigenous people of Turkestan either ambivalent or turned completely against them. How did this happen? Was Enver really that terrible of a general? Yes.

The answer is complicated, but it breaks down into three different reasons:

1. While the Basmachi were enjoying a resurgence, there is nothing suggesting it was a sustainable resurgence. Remember Frunze arrived in 1920 and overthrew everything people knew. No more Musburo, no more Khiva, no more Bukhara. Of course, people are going to flee into whatever seems familiar or whatever promises to restore order. The problem is that the Basmachi didn't have the capability to live up to these promises, many promises the Basmachi never actually made.
 - a. The Basmachi weren't united, and they weren't organized. They were small groups of soldiers who served different warlords. Madamin-Bek and General Monstrov got the closest to actually uniting and organizing the Basmachi and they still had to occasionally make deals with the Bolshevik to survive. And as soon as Madamin died, that organization fell apart. Ibrahim-Bek is the Basmachi's best commander, but he had no interest in working with anyone besides the Bukharan Emir. Enver did nothing to try and unite these different forces. In fact, he exasperated the divides.
 - b. Simply put, the Basmachi weren't built to sustain or support the resurgence they experienced after the fall of Bukhara

2. Enver Pasha had no idea what he was doing. He ran to Central Asia because he was wanted in Turkey and Europe. He thought the Bolsheviks would help him regain power in Turkey and when that didn't happen he needed a new cause. He clung to the Basmachi because he conflated their cause with Pan-Turkism and because who else would take him? But he didn't know anything about Turkestan, the Basmachi, or the cause *they* were fighting. He was taking advantage of a situation that he didn't fully understand, so of course that's going to blow up in his face.
 - a. He didn't appreciate the tactics best suited for guerilla warfare. He fought the war like it was a regular war relying on trenches and mass attacks. Those tactics are a death sentence for a guerilla movement and the Basmachi paid the price.
3. The Turkestan of 1921-1922 was very different from the Turkestan of 1918-1920. The Bolsheviks hold on the region was tenuous, but it was stronger than it had been earlier in the civil war. They had the benefit of a state that could supply their armies, they had the benefit of having local cadre willing to bring communism to the people, they had the benefit of being able to offer food, supplies, and security to the people. The Basmachi had none of that nor were they interested in building that capacity. Frunze's strategy works because he focuses on the military component and the social/economic component. The Basmachi were focused on the military and survival component. They didn't have an answer to the social and economic needs and Enver was clueless.

And yet, despite all these setbacks, the death of Enver Pasha did not spell the death of the Basmachi, for there was still Ibrahim-Bek. Ibrahim refused to work with Enver Pasha and led his own attacks while the Red Army forced on Enver. It was now up to Ibrahim to gather the remaining Basmachi forces and continue the war.

Outro

Thank you for listening. We hope you enjoyed this episode. You can listen to our full catalogue on Spotify, iTunes, and our website www.samswarroom.com. Please join our Patreon to support our research and future projects. Until next time wash your hands, practice social distancing, and stay safe.

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