head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate, Rev. Ole Christian Kvarme, general secretary of the Norwegian Bible Society and Dr Boris Arapović, director of the IBT.

UBS states that the Memorandum of Understanding is not a formal agreement but an acknowledgement of the urgent need for more extensive production and distribution of Scriptures in the Soviet Union. It is the first public recognition by the Russian Orthodox Church that it is interested in the establishment of some form of Soviet office or branch of UBS. Dr Hans Florin, UBS regional secretary for Europe and the Middle East, observed that,

> One way to narrow the gap between supply and demand of the Bible in the Soviet Union is the establishment of a printing press, similar to the Amity Printing Company in China where the UBS assisted Chinese Christians in setting up a press for scripture production.

He went on to say that a Bible Instrument in the USSR linked with UBS would benefit from advantages enjoyed by other UBS members. These include translation expertise, technical assistance in production and distribution, the benefits of large-scale purchasing and the sharing of financial and personnel resources.

'Events are moving so quickly, it's hard to keep pace with them,' Dr Florin remarked. UBS is to continue discussions with church and state bodies in the USSR with a view to the formation of a Bible Instrument and to pursue the possibility of setting up a Bible printing press. The establishment or otherwise of a UBS branch and Bible printing press in the Soviet Union will be an indicator of how far the new 'tolerant' attitude towards religion is to go. It is interesting to note that in 1971 the *Khristianin* printing press appealed to the Council of Ministers to recognise their activity as legal. No reply was received.

*Compiled by members of Keston College staff*

# Islam and Nationalist Unrest in Soviet Central Asia

At the end of May this year the market in the Uzbek town of Kuvasai witnessed a fight over the price of strawberries. As a result one person died and over 60 were injured. Ten days later bloody inter-communal rioting broke out in various towns of the Fergana valley, violence which within a week had caused over 90 deaths and left hundreds homeless. The victims of this unrest were predominantly Meskhetian Turks, forcibly deported to the region from their south Georgian homeland in 1944; the instigators of this violence appear to have been native Uzbeks, whose social and economic grievances found a convenient scapegoat in the 'strangers within'. In mid-June similar events occurred in neighbouring Kazakhstan where, yet again, it was non-Kazakh minorities who bore the brunt of the violence.

Official explanations of the unrest

focused on various factors. On 4 June Soviet television spoke of 'disorders on an inter-ethnic basis provoked by extremist elements', a view supported by *Pravda* two days later. Yet as the riots spread to more towns and as increasing numbers of Interior Ministry troops were drafted in to keep order, official sources isolated other reasons underlying the disturbances, in particular socio-economic problems in the region. Press reports noted that in many towns in this region there was a surplus of manpower and that some young people had not worked for three, four, or even ten years; on 17 June *Komsomol'skaya pravda* reported that 20,000 young people were unemployed in the Fergana region alone.

In shifting at least part of the blame onto 'social problems' the authorities were highlighting some of the present economic difficulties affecting the Central Asian republics. Large population increases have occurred at a time when Moscow appears to be reducing its investment commitments to Central Asia. Indeed, on a visit to Tashkent last year Gorbachev made clear his belief that the region was not pulling its weight within the national economy and that it needed to become more self-sufficient. Yet, as several central Asian intellectuals have pointed out, it is Moscow's century-long treatment of the region as a cotton colony that has prevented the Central Asians from producing all that they need. Moreover, the targets set by Moscow have been unrealistically high pushing successive republican leaderships into the padding of production figures on a massive scale. This in turn has meant the region bearing the brunt of anti-corrupton campaigns which, insofar as press coverage of such investigations has concentrated on Uzbekistan, has affronted national pride by suggesting that somehow the Uzbeks are more prone to corruption than the other peoples of the USSR.

Although few western correspondents visit Central Asia and despite the fact that the region's press seems less affected by *glasnost'* than that of other Soviet republics, a close study of the Central Asian press over the last 12 months suggests that ethnic and social unrest was developing even before the recent events in the Fergana valley. On 19 May Uzbek First Secretary Rafik Nishanov gave a speech to the republican Central Committee which revealed considerable concern over the activities of informal groups in various parts of the republic who were said to be 'exploiting' economic and nationality grievances. Two days later *Pravda vostoka* carried an old-style interview with the republican KGB chairman who seemed to blame all the region's problems on 'extremists' supported by foreign powers.

In some cases economic issues have provided the focus for disturbances, though few seem to have been without their ethnic component. During early May the republic of Turkmenistan witnessed unrest in the capital Ashkhabad and in the town of Nebit-dag. According to official press accounts the targets of the protestors were the newly formed cooperatives which were accused of charging excessively high prices. Yet even here later articles in the main Turkmen Russian language paper spoke of 'extremists' stirring up hatred between different peoples, with the Armenian community apparently bearing the brunt of the attack. Less clear is whether the Armenians were attacked as 'Christians' in conflict with fellow Turks across the Caspian Sea, or simply because they were dominant in the local cooperatives — Armenians were prominent in such ventures even before the revolution in what is now Turkmenistan. Interestingly enough,

it was 'Caucasians', including Armenians, who were assaulted by the Kazakh rioters in mid-June.

Wider issues have been taken up by the Uzbek Popular Front *Birlik* (Unity), whose concerns range over questions of language, culture, ecology (especially the fast-disappearing Aral Sea) and the role of non-Uzbeks within the republic. During March and April this year *Birlik* held mass demonstrations in Tashkent, though they have come under fierce attack from the republican authorities and were accused of organising some of the pogroms in the Fergana valley. There seems to be little sustance in these charges however, for on 8 June leaders of *Birlik*, the Meskhetian Turks and the Crimean Tatars signed a joint appeal for calm. Moreover, as *Literaturnaya gazeta* pointed out on 21 June, it is absurd to levy such charges against an organisation that is essentially pan-Turkic in nature.

There is no sign here of the local communist leadership seeking to compromise with the Popular Front as has happened in the Baltic republics, though it is worth noting that during the first session of the Congress of Peoples' Deputies First Secretary Nishanov took over one of the nationalist demands, arguing strongly for an end to the cotton-monoculture previously forced upon the region.

Although official reports focused on nationalistic and socio-economic aspects of the Fergana valley unrest, Gorbachev, during his visit to West Germany, threw in another component when he reportedly stated that 'it is not only a question of inter-ethnic relations — fundamentalism has reared its head.' Perhaps inevitably western correspondents jumped on this statement, seeking to find religious elements in a conflict taking place in an area and between peoples with strong religious traditions. Yet leaders of the Meskhetian community were quick to play down religious factors pointing out that both nationalities were Muslims. And though the Soviet authorities called in the newly appointed Central Asian Mufti to appeal for calm on local radio stations, there is little evidence that his statements had any impact. Clearly if there were religious elements behind the unrest they were not to be found in the official Islamic establishment.

Nonetheless, there is evidence to suggest growing Islamic activism in Central Asia, within the official mosques but also amongst various unofficial groups. In February Muslims took to the streets of Tashkent to demand the removal of the state appointed Mufti of Central Asia and Kazakhstan. According to some sources a group calling itself *Islam and Democracy* was behind this demonstration, and, although official sources depicted it as a spontaneous happening, the Mufti offered his 'resignation' within a few days. Consequently steps were taken to assuage Muslim opinion with the opening of more mosques, the admission of greater numbers of students into the two Central Asian medressahs, and the transfer from a state museum to the Central Asian Muslim Board of one of the oldest surviving copies of the Koran.

From other press reports in recent months it seems that religious unrest is taking various forms. In some cases many Muslim communities are simply doing more openly what they have been doing for years — visiting 'unofficial' mosques (which greatly outnumber the 300 or so registered mosques in Central Asia), setting up Koranic schools, producing literature, enforcing Islamic norms of behaviour more publicly in rural areas, and utilising the current poor employment situation as a means of returning women to the home — in recent months Uzbek party boss

Nishanov has on at least two occasions referred to groups attempting to 'bring back the veil under the slogan of democratisation'. There are also indications that Muslims have been demonstrating more frequently for the opening of new mosques, the removal of corrupt clerics and the printing of religious literature. In the months before violence broke out in Fergana Muslims in the town of Namangan, a few miles north of Fergana, took to the streets to demand more mosques. According to *Ogonek* (1989, No. 29) these believers were strongly influenced by 'Wahhabist' — a puritanical form of Islam dominant in Saudi Arabia — and pan-Islamic ideas.

Although there is no clear evidence of a religious component to the recent unrest in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, it would not be surprising to find Islamic elements in future conflicts in the region. Muslim leaders, especially unofficial activists, do have considerable influence in rural areas, and for many Central Asians being a 'Muslim' is the same as being a 'Tadzhik' or an 'Uzbek' — a factor that might play some role in nationalist unrest directed against Russian domination. Yet there are also differences within the region — between the Sunni Uzbeks and the Shiite Tadzhiks, between the Islamic establishment, Sufi brotherhoods, and 'Wahhabi puritans'. Urban based Central Asian intellectuals might find Islam attractive as part of the national heritage and as a means of exerting influence in the rural areas, but many may find more 'fundamentalist' expressions of Islam unacceptable — especially women. What does seem clear is that Central Asia is increasingly going to be affected by the nationalist activities we have witnessed elsewhere in the USSR, and that Islam is likely to be an important aspect of the ferment. And this can only add to the problems facing Mr Gorbachev and his reform programme.

JOHN ANDERSON

# Formation of a League of Free-Thinkers in the GDR

In apparent contrast to the gradually more open attitude towards religion of states such as Hungary and the Soviet Union, and their rethinking of the role of religion in a socialist state, a League of Free-Thinkers (*Verband der Freidenker*) has been formed in the GDR to spread scientific atheism.

A document issued by the propaganda section of the Central Council of the Free German Youth (the national youth organisation), dated January 1989, gives details of the nature of the League. It is absolutely clear that free thought is another name for scientific atheism.

The document sets out the aims of the *VdF*:

1. At a time of intensified ideological conflict to use more refined methods in imbuing all classes and age groups of the GDR with our ideology.
2. To help people to understand the ideology and policy of our party.