



"THE CAMPAIGN FOR THE ELIMINATION OF ILLITERACY IN EARLY SOVIET UZBEKISTAN AND ITS REPRESENTATION IN THE PERIODICAL PRESS"

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Abstract

This article investigates the campaign for the elimination of illiteracy in early Soviet Uzbekistan and examines the ways in which this campaign was portrayed in the periodical press of the 1920s and early 1930s. Following the establishment of Soviet authority in Central Asia, literacy became a central element of the broader project of social transformation and political consolidation. In Uzbekistan, where traditional educational structures had long shaped intellectual life, the literacy campaign unfolded within a complex cultural and social environment.

Drawing upon contemporary newspapers and journals, this study analyzes how the press framed the struggle against illiteracy as both an educational necessity and a revolutionary duty. Periodicals presented literacy not merely as a technical skill but as a decisive instrument for constructing a new social order. Reports, editorials, and public appeals emphasized the moral, political, and cultural significance of participation in literacy courses, often portraying them as a pathway toward modernization and civic engagement.

At the same time, the article considers the press as a historical source that reflects the tensions, limitations, and practical challenges accompanying the implementation of literacy policies. By examining the language, imagery, and narratives employed in the media, the study reveals how educational reform was embedded within the ideological framework of the Soviet "cultural revolution."

The findings suggest that the periodical press functioned simultaneously as a mechanism of mobilization and as a medium through which the evolving relationship between state policy and local society can be critically assessed.

Keywords: Early Soviet Uzbekistan; elimination of illiteracy (*likbez*); literacy campaign; Soviet educational policy; periodical press; cultural revolution; propaganda and media discourse; social transformation; Central Asian history.

Introduction

The consolidation of Soviet authority in Central Asia after 1917 brought about a far-reaching transformation of political institutions, social structures, and cultural life. Among the earliest and most ambitious initiatives of the new regime was the campaign for the elimination of illiteracy (*likvidatsiia bezgramotnosti*, commonly known as *likbez*). Adopted at the all-Union level by the Decree of the Council of People's Commissars of 26 December 1919, which mandated literacy instruction for citizens between the ages of eight and fifty, the campaign was



conceived as a foundational step in the construction of a socialist society.¹ Literacy was not treated as a purely educational objective; it was understood as a political instrument indispensable for the dissemination of Soviet ideology and the integration of previously marginalized populations into the structures of the new state.

In the territories that would later constitute the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic (established in 1924 as part of the national delimitation of Central Asia), the literacy campaign unfolded in a complex and layered social environment. On the eve of Soviet rule, educational life in the region had been shaped primarily by *maktabs* and *madrasas*, institutions rooted in Islamic intellectual traditions. While reformist *Jadid* educators had introduced new-method schools and advocated curricular modernization in the late imperial period, literacy rates remained limited, particularly among rural populations and women.² The Bolshevik leadership interpreted this situation both as evidence of “backwardness” and as an opportunity for revolutionary transformation.

From the early 1920s onward, literacy was framed in official discourse as a weapon of the “cultural revolution.”³ Party resolutions and educational directives emphasized that the eradication of illiteracy was essential for economic development, political participation, and ideological consciousness. In Uzbekistan, literacy courses were organized in urban centers, industrial sites, Red Army units, and later in collective farms. By the end of the decade, statistical reports suggested significant growth in the number of newly literate adults, though regional disparities and infrastructural limitations remained substantial.⁴

In this process, the periodical press assumed a central role. Newspapers such as *Pravda Vostoka* and Uzbek-language publications including *Qizil O‘zbekiston* regularly published articles praising literacy instructors, reporting on enrollment figures, and calling upon local communities to join the campaign. The press did more than disseminate information; it shaped the language through which literacy was understood. Illiteracy was described as a remnant of the “old world,” while participation in literacy courses was portrayed as a moral obligation to the socialist future. Editorials often linked the acquisition of literacy to emancipation from superstition, economic exploitation, and patriarchal constraints.⁵ Yet the representation of the literacy campaign in the press also reveals underlying tensions. Reports celebrating rapid progress coexisted with appeals for greater mobilization, complaints about shortages of textbooks and qualified instructors, and acknowledgments of resistance in certain districts. Such materials provide historians with valuable insight into both the ideological aspirations and the practical challenges of early Soviet modernization in Central Asia.

This article examines how the campaign for the elimination of illiteracy in early Soviet Uzbekistan was constructed, justified, and popularized in the periodical press of the 1920s and

¹ “Decree on the Elimination of Illiteracy among the Population of the RSFSR,” 26 December 1919, in *Collected Decrees and Resolutions of the Soviet Government, 1917–1920* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920).

² Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 145–176.

³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 197–221.

⁴ Shoshana Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport: Praeger, 2001), 58–74.

⁵ “Savodsizlikni tugatish – har bir fuqaroning burchi,” *Qizil O‘zbekiston*, 15 March 1927; also reports in *Pravda Vostoka*, 1928 issues.



early 1930s. By analyzing contemporary newspapers and journals alongside relevant legislative and institutional developments, the study seeks to demonstrate that the press functioned simultaneously as an instrument of mobilization and as a historical source reflecting the complexities of cultural transformation in a predominantly traditional society.

Analysis of sources

The present study draws primarily upon periodical publications issued in Uzbekistan during the 1920s and early 1930s, complemented by legislative documents and archival materials from central and republican institutions. The press of this period constitutes both a medium of ideological mobilization and a documentary record of the literacy campaign's implementation. A critical reading of these sources makes it possible to reconstruct not only official priorities but also the practical and social dimensions of the struggle against illiteracy.

Among Uzbek-language newspapers, *Qizil O'zbekiston* occupies particular importance. As a central republican publication, it regularly reported on literacy courses, teacher training initiatives, and enrollment statistics. Articles from the mid-1920s frequently framed illiteracy as a "remnant of the old order" and characterized participation in literacy circles as a civic obligation.⁶ Reports from 1926–1928 highlight the expansion of evening schools for workers and special courses for women, often presenting numerical data to demonstrate progress.

However, alongside celebratory narratives, occasional references to shortages of teaching materials and insufficient instructors suggest that the campaign faced structural limitations.

Russian-language publications such as *Pravda Vostoka*, published in Tashkent, provide additional perspective. Intended for a broader Soviet readership, this newspaper placed the Uzbek literacy campaign within the larger framework of the all-Union *likbez* movement. Articles emphasized the connection between literacy and economic modernization, particularly in relation to industrial development and collectivization.⁷ The rhetoric employed in these publications reflects the wider discourse of the "cultural revolution," in which literacy was portrayed as a prerequisite for socialist consciousness and productive labor.

Specialized educational journals, including *Maorif va o'qituvchi*, offer more detailed insights into pedagogical practice. These publications discussed instructional methods, textbook development, and teacher preparation, thereby illuminating the practical mechanisms underlying official proclamations. Debates over script reform—particularly the transition from Arabic to Latin script in 1928—appear prominently in these pages, underscoring the close relationship between literacy policy and broader cultural transformation. Such discussions reveal that the literacy campaign was not merely quantitative but also linguistic and ideological in character.

Archival materials from the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan (O'zR MDA) further contextualize press narratives. Reports of the People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros) document persistent challenges, including irregular attendance, limited funding, and disparities between urban and rural districts. These records occasionally diverge from the optimistic tone of published articles, thereby highlighting the propagandistic dimension of the press. Comparative analysis between archival data and newspaper reports enables a more balanced assessment of the campaign's actual scope and effectiveness.

Legislative acts and party resolutions also constitute an essential category of sources. The 1919 decree on the elimination of illiteracy established the legal foundation for compulsory

⁶ "Savodsizlikni tugatish – yangi hayot sari qadam," *Qizil O'zbekiston*, 12 April 1926.

⁷ "Likvidatsiia bezgramotnosti v Srednei Azii," *Pravda Vostoka*, 5 May 1928.



literacy instruction across Soviet territory.⁸ Subsequent directives in the 1920s extended this framework to Central Asia, integrating local campaigns into all-Union planning structures. These documents clarify the political objectives underpinning literacy policy and provide a reference point against which media representations can be evaluated.

Taken together, the combination of newspapers, specialized journals, archival reports, and legislative texts allows for a multi-layered reconstruction of the literacy campaign in early Soviet Uzbekistan. While the periodical press consistently articulated the ideological aspirations of the state, it also inadvertently preserved traces of logistical difficulties and social resistance. A critical analysis of these materials demonstrates that the campaign's representation in the press was shaped by the imperatives of mobilization and persuasion, even as it reflected the uneven realities of implementation on the ground.

Main part

Political Foundations of the Literacy Campaign in Uzbekistan. The campaign for the elimination of illiteracy in Uzbekistan must be understood within the broader framework of early Soviet state-building. The Bolshevik leadership regarded literacy not simply as an educational objective but as a prerequisite for political consolidation. The decree of 26 December 1919 “On the Elimination of Illiteracy among the Population of the RSFSR” legally obligated citizens between the ages of eight and fifty to acquire basic reading and writing skills. Although initially formulated in the context of the Russian Soviet Republic, this decree soon extended to Turkestan and, after 1924, to the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic.

In Central Asia, literacy policy acquired an additional dimension. The region was frequently described in official discourse as culturally “backward,” a characterization that served to legitimize intensified intervention.⁹ According to early statistical estimates, literacy rates in the territories that later formed Uzbekistan were significantly lower than in the European parts of the former empire, especially among women. These figures, though often imprecise, became a powerful rhetorical instrument in mobilizing resources for educational reform.

The establishment of the Uzbek SSR in 1924 marked a turning point. The People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros) was reorganized to implement all-Union directives while adapting them to local conditions. Archival materials indicate that by 1925–1926, literacy circles (*likpunkty*) had been opened in major urban centers such as Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara. Yet the extension of these initiatives into rural districts remained uneven. Reports frequently note a shortage of trained instructors and the absence of standardized textbooks in the Uzbek language.

Institutional Mechanisms and Social Mobilization. The literacy campaign relied on a combination of state administration and mass mobilization. Trade unions, Komsomol cells, women's committees, and factory administrations were all tasked with organizing literacy courses. The press played an essential role in coordinating these efforts. Newspapers regularly published enrollment targets, progress reports, and public appeals urging participation.

Articles in *Qizil O'zbekiston* during 1926–1928 illustrate how literacy was framed as both a personal duty and a collective responsibility. One editorial declared that “without

⁸ “Decree on the Elimination of Illiteracy among the Population of the RSFSR,” 26 December 1919, in *Collected Decrees and Resolutions of the Soviet Government, 1917–1920* (Moscow: Gosizdat, 1920).

⁹ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 125–130.



literacy, the worker cannot become a conscious builder of socialism.”¹⁰ Such statements linked educational attainment directly to ideological maturity. Literacy was presented not merely as a technical skill but as a transformation of consciousness.

The campaign assumed particular urgency in relation to women. Soviet authorities viewed female illiteracy as both a social problem and a symbol of the persistence of patriarchal structures. Special literacy courses for women were organized under the supervision of women’s departments (*zhenotdely*). Contemporary reports describe evening classes held in private homes and community centers to accommodate cultural sensitivities. However, archival correspondence reveals that attendance was often irregular, especially in rural areas where traditional norms limited women’s public participation.

Script reform further intensified the campaign’s transformative ambitions. The transition from the Arabic script to a Latin-based alphabet in 1928 was officially justified as a means of facilitating literacy acquisition and integrating Central Asia into the broader Soviet cultural sphere. Periodical publications enthusiastically promoted the “new alphabet” as a symbol of progress. Yet the reform also disrupted existing educational practices and required the rapid production of new textbooks, creating logistical strain.¹¹

Representation in the Periodical Press. The periodical press did not merely report on the literacy campaign; it actively shaped its meaning. Newspapers constructed a narrative in which illiteracy was equated with the “darkness” of the past, while literacy symbolized entry into a modern socialist future. Visual imagery—photographs of adult learners holding primers, group portraits of literacy instructors—reinforced this symbolic dichotomy.

Russian-language publications such as *Pravda Vostoka* situated the Uzbek campaign within the broader all-Union struggle against illiteracy. Articles emphasized quantitative achievements, frequently citing increases in enrollment figures. These statistics served a mobilizing function, demonstrating that the region was advancing toward socialist modernization. However, discrepancies between reported achievements and internal administrative data suggest that figures were sometimes inflated for political effect.

Educational journals offered a more nuanced perspective. Discussions in *Maorif va o‘qituvchi* addressed methodological challenges, including the adaptation of teaching materials to adult learners and the need to reconcile ideological instruction with basic literacy training.¹² Such debates indicate that educators were aware of practical constraints, even as official rhetoric emphasized rapid progress.

By the early 1930s, the campaign became increasingly integrated into the broader objectives of collectivization and industrialization. Literacy was portrayed as indispensable for understanding agricultural directives, participating in collective farm administration, and mastering technical instructions in factories. In this context, the elimination of illiteracy was no longer framed solely as cultural reform but as an economic necessity.

Tensions Between Ideology and Reality. Despite the ambitious scope of the campaign, its implementation encountered persistent obstacles. Archival documents from the late 1920s reveal complaints about inadequate funding, insufficient teaching materials, and the seasonal interruption of classes during agricultural work. Rural districts, in particular, struggled to maintain consistent attendance.

¹⁰ “Savodsizlik – sotsializm qurilishiga to‘siq,” *Qizil O‘zbekiston*, 14 March 1927.

¹¹ “Yangi alifbo – yangi hayot,” *Maorif va o‘qituvchi*, no. 3 (1929): 5–9.

¹² “Savod o‘rgatish metodikasi masalalari,” *Maorif va o‘qituvchi*, no. 6 (1930): 12–18.



Moreover, the campaign's ideological framing occasionally generated resistance. For segments of the population, literacy courses were perceived less as opportunities for advancement than as instruments of state control. While open opposition was rarely documented in the press, internal reports acknowledge instances of reluctance and passive non-compliance.

Nevertheless, measurable progress was achieved. By the early 1930s, official statistics indicated a significant increase in literacy rates compared to pre-revolutionary levels.¹³ Although these figures require critical evaluation, there is little doubt that the campaign expanded access to basic education on an unprecedented scale.

Results

The analysis of primary sources—periodical press, archival records, and official decrees—reveals several key outcomes of the literacy campaign in early Soviet Uzbekistan. These results demonstrate both the achievements and the limitations of the initiative, highlighting the complex interplay between ideological goals and practical implementation.

First, the campaign significantly expanded access to literacy. By the late 1920s, thousands of new literacy courses (*likpunkty*) had been established across urban and rural districts. According to archival reports from the People's Commissariat of Education, by 1928 over 35,000 adults had participated in organized literacy programs in Tashkent, Samarkand, and Bukhara alone.

Enrollment among women, previously marginalized in formal education, accounted for approximately 40 percent of total participants in major urban centers. This represents a substantial increase compared to pre-revolutionary literacy rates, which were estimated at less than 20 percent among the general population and significantly lower among women.

Second, the periodical press played a dual role in both documenting and promoting literacy. Newspapers such as *Qizil O'zbekiston* and *Pravda Vostoka* systematically reported on enrollment figures, success stories, and exemplary instructors. Articles frequently emphasized ideological and moral dimensions, portraying literacy as a civic duty and a tool for socialist consciousness. For instance, a 1927 editorial in *Qizil O'zbekiston* declared that literacy was “the foundation upon which the new Soviet society will be built,” highlighting the explicit connection between education and state-building. This rhetoric helped mobilize public participation and maintain momentum for the campaign, even in regions where logistical challenges were severe.

Third, literacy initiatives were closely linked to broader social reforms, particularly regarding gender equality and cultural modernization. Special courses for women, organized under the supervision of *zhenotdely*, introduced tens of thousands of women to reading, writing, and civic education.

Contemporary accounts in *Maorif va o'qituvchi* describe how these courses combined basic literacy training with instruction in hygiene, social etiquette, and political literacy.¹⁴ The promotion of women's literacy was framed as essential for the creation of the “new Soviet woman,” signaling a direct ideological purpose behind educational expansion.

Fourth, the campaign contributed to a profound transformation of linguistic and educational practices. The adoption of the Latin script in 1928 facilitated a standardized approach to literacy but also created transitional difficulties. Newspapers documented the rapid

¹³ Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire*, 131.

¹⁴ “Savod o'rgatish kurslari va ayollar ishtiroki,” *Maorif va o'qituvchi*, no. 6 (1930): 12–18.

production of primers and textbooks while highlighting ongoing shortages of instructors trained in the new script. Archival correspondence confirms that, despite these difficulties, literacy acquisition accelerated in regions where organized courses were consistently maintained.

Finally, while official reports and press coverage emphasize successes, archival sources reveal persistent limitations. Attendance in rural courses remained inconsistent, particularly during harvest seasons, and resources such as textbooks, classrooms, and qualified teachers were unevenly distributed.

Resistance, though often subtle, also existed among local populations unaccustomed to compulsory education, revealing the tension between ideological objectives and social realities. Nevertheless, despite these challenges, the campaign established foundational educational infrastructure and a precedent for future Soviet literacy initiatives in Uzbekistan.

In summary, the campaign for the elimination of illiteracy in early Soviet Uzbekistan produced measurable results: expanded access to education, significant female participation, integration of literacy into broader cultural and ideological programs, and the establishment of educational infrastructure that would support subsequent reforms. At the same time, the campaign exposed enduring social, logistical, and cultural challenges that would continue to shape Soviet educational policy in Central Asia throughout the 1930s.

Conclusion

The campaign for the elimination of illiteracy in early Soviet Uzbekistan represents one of the most significant educational and social initiatives of the 1920s and early 1930s. Analysis of archival records, periodical publications, and legislative documents reveals that the campaign was both ambitious in scope and ideologically charged in purpose. Literacy was consistently framed not merely as an educational goal but as a cornerstone of socialist transformation, a tool for ideological mobilization, and a mechanism for integrating previously marginalized populations into the structures of the new Soviet state.¹⁵

By the end of the 1920s, measurable progress had been achieved. Archival reports indicate that tens of thousands of adults had completed literacy courses in major urban centers, with female participants constituting a substantial proportion of learners. This expansion of access reflects a deliberate effort by the Soviet authorities to address longstanding educational disparities and to promote social modernization. Periodical press coverage, particularly in *Qizil O'zbekiston* and *Pravda Vostoka*, documented these achievements while reinforcing ideological narratives that linked literacy with civic responsibility and socialist consciousness.

The campaign also catalyzed broader cultural and linguistic transformations. The introduction of the Latin script in 1928 facilitated standardized instruction and reflected the broader project of Soviet cultural reform, yet it also posed practical challenges, including shortages of textbooks and trained instructors.

Educational journals such as *Maorif va o'qituvchi* provide detailed evidence of pedagogical adaptation, revealing how literacy instruction was closely tied to debates over methodology, curriculum design, and the inclusion of women learners.

Despite its successes, the campaign faced persistent obstacles. Rural districts experienced irregular attendance due to seasonal labor demands, and the uneven distribution of resources limited the program's reach. Reports from the People's Commissariat of Education

¹⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 220–225.



acknowledge these difficulties, highlighting the tension between ideological objectives and the social realities of implementation. Nevertheless, the overall trajectory of the campaign demonstrates a meaningful expansion of literacy infrastructure and a durable imprint on the educational landscape of Uzbekistan.

In conclusion, the literacy campaign in early Soviet Uzbekistan exemplifies the complex interplay between ideology, social engineering, and practical policy implementation. The periodical press, archival reports, and legislative documents together reveal a campaign that was at once transformative, propagandistic, and constrained by local conditions. The achievements in expanding literacy, particularly among women and previously underserved populations, laid the foundation for subsequent Soviet educational reforms and contributed to the broader modernization of Uzbek society in the interwar period.¹⁶

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¹⁶ Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 134–141.