

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Eastern Europe & Russian Federation > USSR, Soviet Bloc, Russian Empire (history) > History (Russian Empire, USSR) > Russian Revolution > Sultan Galiev > **The Idea of Muslim National Communism: On Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev (1892-1940)**

The Idea of Muslim National Communism: On Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev (1892-1940)

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Contents

- [Sultan-Galiev and the Developm](#)
- [Conspiracies and Re-Articuli](#)
- [Death and Postcolonial Legacie](#)



Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev

Introduction: Marxism and Nationalism Revisited

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, from 1961, Frantz Fanon argued that

Marxist analyses should always be slightly stretched every time we have to confront the colonial problem. [1]

This notion is an excellent starting point for reexamining the postcolonial problematic of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the “provincializing” of Europe. Within subaltern, postcolonial, and decolonial studies, there are two heterogeneous and competing conceptions of this provincialization of Europe, whose entanglement remains a source of ambiguities. There is, on the one hand, a conception that holds provincialization to be synonymous with the particularization, and thus relativization, of “Eurocentric-European thought,” and Marxist thought in particular. There is, on the other hand, an understanding of provincialization as a stretching that underlines the need for an extension and displacement of the borders of theory beyond Europe, as a condition of possibility of an authentic universalization. The opponents of postcolonial critique have until now almost exclusively seemed to resist the first of these two forms of provincialization, relativization, in that they really perceived it to be a break with anti-colonial thought and struggles for emancipation. But they seemed to be a bit less attentive to the second form—stretching or extension—where they would have seen that this indeed draws on deep roots in anti-colonial thought, and anti-colonial Marxism in particular.

There are many ways to retrace this genealogy, that is, to elucidate the continuities as well as the ruptures that are foundational to the historical-epistemological transition and division from anti-colonialism to postcolonial critique. I look to consider here the problem of the nationalization of Marxism. Usually, this is understood as a simple question of the “adaptation of Marxism to singular

conditions”; this does not account for the complexity of the way in which, as Gramsci and C.L.R. James have shown, such a nationalization engages in a process of theoretical and practical translations. The most famous example remains the “sinification” of Marxism led by Mao Zedong. As Arif Dirlik writes, in what is otherwise an unrelenting critique of postcolonial studies: “One of Mao’s greatest strengths as a leader was his ability to translate Marxist concepts into a Chinese idiom”; in other words, he articulated a “vernacularization of Marxism.” [2] Here, one can already see that the process of the nationalization of Marxism is not reducible to Stalin’s formula of “national in form, socialist in content.” [3]

I am interested in an experience that is less well-known, that of “Muslim national communism” as it was developed in Soviet Russia, then in the USSR, from 1917 to the end of the 1920s. It seems important to shed light on this experience for at least three reasons:

1. First, as the name indicates, *Muslim communism* raises the question - more relevant than ever - of the relations between, on the one hand, emancipatory movements with “white origins” (as in the Soviet example) and, on the other hand, Islam and the groups that integrate it in multiple ways into their own political claims.
2. Second, one is confronted with an anti-imperialist emancipatory movement that developed in concert with a revolutionary process in the very heart of the (Russian) empire, a historical situation whose most famous precedent is the connection between the French and Haitian Revolutions at the transition of the 18th to the 19th century.
3. The third reason concerns a “colonial revolution” that unfolds from within the territorial borders of the “metropole,” its confines. But it is not a matter of an exception so much as a limit-situation that discloses the fact that, in a global imperialist context, extra-European nationalism never forms an “outside” to empire; rather, it is its permanent limit. To think the nationalization of Marxism, and more specifically, of Bolshevism, as the provincialization of Europe, means to therefore not to imagine an radical alterity opposed to Marxist-Leninism, and could not alter or relativize the latter; it is to conceptualize the theoretical and practical margins of Bolshevism-itself the the product of a prior translation of Marxism into Russia-or in other words, to stretch it. This entails as well the elucidation of the modes through which Bolshevism was rethought from the margins of the empire.

Not having any pretensions of giving an overview of all of Muslim national communism, I am interested here in someone who remains its major figure, the Tartar Bolshevik intellectual and militant Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, whose first arrest was remarked upon by Trotsky in 1923, when he cited Kamenev’s words:

“Do you remember the arrest of Sultan-Galiev? [...] This was the first arrest of a prominent Party member made upon the initiative of Stalin [...] That was Stalin’s first taste of blood.” [4]

But let’s take things up from the beginning. [5]

Sultan-Galiev and the Development of Muslim National Communism

Sultan-Galiev was born in Bashkiria in 1892 into a poor family. In 1907, he enters the teacher-training school of Kazan, which is also a meeting place of nationalist and revolutionary ideas. Over the subsequent years, he engages extensively in journalism and joins the Muslim nationalist movement. Few months after the February Revolution, he attends the All-Muslim Conference in Moscow and is elected Secretary of the All-Russia Muslim Council. He joins the Bolshevik Party in June 1917. In October, he takes part in the Kazan military revolutionary Committee and is

designated head of the Muslim Military College, among other responsibilities. Then begins a period of active collaboration with Stalin in the People's Commissariat of Nationalities. Three primary strategic orientations or directions emerge from Sultan-Galiev's work during these years:

1. The first one concerns the formation of a Muslim Red Army or, as he puts it, an "Oriental Proletarian Red Army." [6] As argued by Bennigsen and Quelquejay, Sultan-Galiev, years before Mao, conceives of such an army as "a genuine organized, hierarchical and highly politicized 'social class,' capable of replacing the missing indigenous proletariat as the driving revolutionary force." [7]
2. The second strategic orientation consists in the development of a Russian Muslims' Communist Party to be able to preserve the autonomy of the Muslim revolutionary movement, which would be jeopardized if it was incorporated in organizations led by Russians, all the more so given the long tradition of Russian chauvinism.
3. The third orientation, whose roots go far deeper than the Soviet Revolution, strives for the creation of a large Tatar-Bashkir Republic within the boundaries of Soviet Russia.

During the same period, Sultan-Galiev also lays the theoretical and ideological foundations of Muslim communism, which can also be synthesized into three main points:

1. First, the relations between social classes and, relatedly, between social revolution and national revolution. Sultan-Galiev insists on the homogeneity of the Muslim social structure and the absence of a Tatar proletariat. He argues that during the first stages of the revolution the leadership of the movement should be assumed by revolutionaries of a petty bourgeois background. By recasting Lenin's opposition between oppressing and oppressed nations, he calls for a "revenge of the oppressed over the oppressors," and declares that "all the colonized Muslim peoples are proletarian peoples." [8]

2. The second point refers to the relations between the socialist revolution and Islam. Sultan-Galiev argues that, "like all the other religions in the world," Islam "is doomed to disappear." [9] But he also says that "among the 'great religions' of the world, [it] is the youngest, thus the most enduring and strongest in terms of the influence it exerts." He asserts that Islamic law contains some "positive" prescriptions such as the "mandatory nature of education...the obligation to work and trade," and "the absence of private property rights to lands, waters and forests." In addition, Islam's singularity relies on the fact that "during the last century, the whole Muslim world has been exploited by Western Europe's imperialism." Islam was and is still "an oppressed religion forced to be on the defensive." [10] Such a permanent oppression is the source of a deep "feeling of solidarity" among Muslims as well as of a powerful desire for emancipation. According to Sultan-Galiev, Communists should not strive to eliminate Islam, but rather work at its de-spiritualization, its "Marxization."

The third and last point concerns the exportation of the Bolshevik Revolution or, in Sultan-Galiev's terms, the transportation of the "revolutionary energy" beyond the borders of Russia. Revolution, he says, "must expand and become deeper, both in its internal content and its external manifestations." [11] But the question is: in which direction? Like other non-European Marxists, such as M.N Roy from India, Sultan-Galiev recommends to reverse the order of revolutionary priorities and to give the primacy to the revolution in the East. Not only isn't this latter conditioned by the prior success of the revolution in the West, it is likely to overcome the decrease of revolutionary energy in Western Europe. For Sultan-Galiev, the anti-colonial revolution in the East has to be conceived of as the precondition of European and world revolution, and not the reverse: "Deprived of the East, and cut off from India, Afghanistan, Persia and the other Asian and African colonies, Western imperialism will wither and die a natural death." [12] Sultan-Galiev's tour-de-force

consists in arguing that Russian Muslim communists are the best qualified to propagate the Soviet revolution in the East. He calls for a decentering of revolutionary initiative and urges the Bolshevik leaders to establish the margins of Russia as the central source of the revolution in the East. In other words, for Sultan-Galiev, nationalism at the periphery of the empires is nothing but the condition of possibility of a needed renewal of internationalism on a global scale.

However, the alliance between Muslim communists and Soviet leaders, closely linked to the demands of the civil war, deteriorated rapidly. After 1918, the Muslim Communist Party is transformed into the Muslim section of the Bolshevik Party; the promise of the creation of a Tatar-Bashkir republic gradually evaporated. Sultan-Galiev become a persona non grata and does not attend Congress of the People of the East held in Baku in 1920, which he has helped to organize. It is often said that this Congress represented the high point of the “brief romance” between Soviet power and the anti-imperialist movements for emancipation in the East; a moment, however ephemeral, of hope, symbolized by Zinoviev’s call for a “holy war against English and French capitalists.” [13]

However, things at least went differently for the Muslim communists in Russia who saw their hopes to spread revolution in the East destroyed by. on the one hand, the affirmation of the contemporaneity of the social revolution and the national revolution, whose leadership should not be incumbent to the “radical bourgeoisie, but the poor peasantry”; and on the other hand, the emphasis on “the absolute primacy of the proletarian revolution in the West over the colonial revolution.” [14] For Sultan-Galiev, these rejections did not so much signal the victory of one conception of the global revolution against another—his own—as the victory of the Grand-Russian chauvinism that he was always distrustful and fearful of, constantly fighting against its hold on the Russian communists whose colonial mentalities and practices were inherited from the Tsarist empire. These latter were also criticized by Giorgi Safarov in a work published in 1921, *The Colonial Revolution*. [15]

Conspiracies and Re-Articulations

Sultan-Galiev’s downfall came in 1921. A few weeks after the XIIth Party Congress, he is arrested in Moscow and excluded from the Party. He is accused of “conspiracy” for having attempted to organize a revolution in the East through underground work with communists and non-communists in Russia and outside Russia. Chief among these were rebel nationalist organizations and leaders, such as Ahmed Zeki Validov and the Basmatchi movement in Central Asia. [16] This condemnation was the beginning of a vast campaign of repression against those associated with “Sultan-Galievism.”

Between May 1923 until around the end of 1924, when his last hopes to be reinstated into the Party are dashed, Sultan-Galiev finds himself in a marginal position, already more “inside” but not yet on the “outside” of Soviet revolutionary affairs. It is in prison, where he would remain for a few more months, that he completes an autobiographical letter, addressed to Stalin and Trotsky, and in which he elaborates his theses on world revolution:

I thought that the liberation movement in the colonies and the semi-colonies and the revolutionary movement of the workers in the metropole were intimately and inextricably linked, and that only a harmonious combination of them could guarantee real success of the international socialist revolution. [17]

For Sultan-Galiev, the condition of possibility of world revolution is the combination and composition, the circulation and mutual intensification, of social revolutions in Europe and anti-colonial revolutions in the East—with both nevertheless remaining autonomous from each other. Yet

this is the situation that, according to him, is produced within the borders of Russia itself:

The success of the Russian Revolution is rightly explained by the harmonious alliance between the interests of the Russian proletariat, on the one hand, and the movements for national and class liberation on its colonial margins, on the other. In this sense, Russia shows all the traits of a great field of experimentation for the world revolution. [18]

This is a strikingly original thesis, and echoes what C.L.R. James will later argue in *The Black Jacobins*, a work in which (to cite Edward Said) the “events in France and in Haiti crisscross and refer to one another like voices in a fugue.” [19]

In a letter to the Central Control Commission dated September 8, 1924, Sultan-Galiev requests to be reinstated into the Party. He confesses his “crime” but argues that it was nothing but “a reaction, even if maybe a pathological one, to Great Power chauvinism.” He also insists on the obstacles to revolutionary work among “backward nationalities” in regions where communist ideas were almost totally unknown before the Revolution. Finally, he puts forward a truly original anti-historicist conception of the revolution in the East:

From my personal work experience among backward nationalities during the Revolution, I concluded that the development of the revolution on our Eastern margins will certainly happen in a non-linear way, not even following curved lines, but following broken lines. [20]

In these marginal spaces of the empire, revolutionary temporality can only be a broken temporality, composed of leaps and ruptures, periods of latency and sudden unrest. This is an understanding of revolution that immediately calls to mind how C.L.R. James will later come to describe the historical process in the Antilles, as consisting of a “series of uncoordinated periods of drift, punctuated by spurts, leaps and catastrophes.” [21]

Death and Postcolonial Legacies

Unsurprisingly, Sultan-Galiev’s request fails. He was never to be reinstated in the Party. Afterwards, he begins to adopt a wholly new strategy, breaking completely with Soviet power; thus from a certain point of view, this is a “counterrevolutionary” strategy. From now on, the enemy is not only the bourgeoisies of imperialist countries, but the “industrial society” as a whole, Soviet Union included. While this period of his life—between 1923 and 1928—remains largely unknown, we know he did author a program, written in Tartar, entitled *Considerations on the Socio-political, Economic, and Cultural Bases of Development of the Turkish People*. [22] It has since been lost but is cited in several Soviet studies. Sultan’s-Galiev break with Soviet power and Bolshevism is expressed through his attempt to tear dialectical materialism from its European origins, and his renaming it as “energetic materialism,” drawing from Eastern sources, in particular the Mongols. This epistemic decentering is only meaningful insofar as it is part of a more general ideological and strategic rupture. Sultan-Galiev advances the idea of a “common front of the oppressed” uniting “all classes of Muslim society, with the exclusion of only the big bourgeoisie and feudal landowners” and joining this front with the “traditional idea of the *Ummah*—community of believers.” [23] In an even more radical manner, he substitutes the opposition “underdeveloped industry” for “exploited-capitalist” and declares that the enemy is not only the “bourgeoisie of the imperialist powers, but all of industrial society,” including the Soviet Union. [24] According to Sultan-Galiev, the “liquidation of the socialist revolution in Russia” was thus beyond recovery, and was necessarily accompanied by the intensification of Great-Russian chauvinism and, more generally, the oppression of Muslim peoples by the West. To be able to avoid this situation, there is only one solution: “the hegemony of the underdeveloped colonial world over the ‘European powers,’ ” [25] or, in his terms, “the

dictatorship of the semi-colonial and colonial countries over the industrial metropolises.” [26] This is why it is necessary to work towards the creation of a Colonial International, which, he says, will be “communist, but independent from the Third International, and even opposed to it.” The heart of this International will be an immense Turkish state within Russia, the Republic of Turan, led by a “Socialist Party of the East.” [27]

Sultan-Galiev devotes his clandestine efforts to these tasks until his second arrest in 1928. He is sentenced to death on July 28th, 1930, and but then this sentence is commuted to ten years in exile at the beginning of 1931. He is then freed in 1934, only to be arrested again in 1937, and sentenced to death in 1939. He is finally shot on the 28th of January, 1940. [28] This marked the end of a tremendous experience of co-genesis: the co-genesis of a socialist revolution in the “metropole” and an anti-colonial revolution at the margins of the empire. But Sultan-Galiev also left behind a legacy that can be traced through a number of revolutionaries who attempted to think the connection between socialism and the process of decolonization in the Muslim world and especially Algeria; this is a legacy that demands careful study and reconstruction today, not only in the colonies and former colonies, but above all in the postcolonial ex-metropolises. [29]

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<https://www.viewpointmag.com/2015/03/23/the-idea-of-muslim-national-communism-on-mirsaid-sultan-galiev/>

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Footnotes

[1] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 40, translation modified.

[2] Arif Dirlik, “Mao Zedong and ‘Chinese Marxism,’” in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, eds. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Cesarino, and Rebecca E. Karl (New York: Routledge, 1996), 144.

[3] “Under the conditions of a dictatorship of the proletariat within a single country, the rise of cultures national in form and socialist in content has to take place, so that when the proletariat wins in the whole world and socialism is a part of ordinary life, these cultures will merge into one culture, socialist both in form and content with a common language.” J.V. Stalin, *Marksizm i*

natsional'no-kolonial'nyi vopros, (Moscow, 1934), 195. Quoted in Marina Frolova-Walker, "National in Form, Socialist in Content': Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics" *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51.2 (1998), 334.

[4] Leon Trotsky, *Stalin: An Appraisal of the Man and His Influence* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1946), 417.

[5] I primarily draw upon the essays of Sultan-Galiev that have been translated into French in Alexandre Bennigsen et Chantal Quelquejay, *Les mouvements nationaux chez les musulmans de Russie: Le « sultangaliévisme » au Tatarstan*. (Paris et La Haye, Mouton & Co, 1960) as well as secondary sources. In addition to Bennigsen and Quelquejay's book mentioned above, there is also their work *Sultan Galiev, le père de la révolution tiers-mondiste: « Les inconnus de l'histoire »* (Paris: Fayard, 1986); Bennigsen also co-authored a book in English that contains three translations of Sultan-Galiev's works, cf. Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); see also Maxime Rodinson, "Sultan-Galiev: A Forgotten Precursor," in *Marxism and the Muslim World*, trans. Jean Matthews (London: Zed Press, 1979). Finally, I occasionally refer to the volume of Sultan-Galiev's writings available in Russian, and to a certain extent Tartar, published in Russian in 1989 and which still demands a careful exegesis, yet to be done: *Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, Izbrannyje troudy* (Kazan: Gasyr, 1998).

[6] "Deuxième Congrès des Organisations Communiste des Peuples d'Orient : Résolution sur la Question d'Orient," presented by Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, *Žizn' nacional'nostej* (La vie des nationalités), n° 46 (54), 7 (20) December 1919, n° 47 (55), 14 (27) December 1919, reprinted in Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Quelquejay, *Le « sultangaliévisme » au Tatarstan*, op. cit., 214.

[7] Alexandre Bennigsen et Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Sultan Galiev, le père de la révolution tiers-mondiste*, op. cit., 123. Also see Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, "The Tartars and the October Revolution," *Žizn' nacional'nostej* 24 (122), 1921, reprinted in Bennigsen and Wimbush, op. cit., 138-144.

[8] Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, cited in Alexandre Bennigsen et Chantal Quelquejay, *Le « sultangaliévisme » au Tatarstan*, op. cit., 105.

[9] *Ibid.*, 106.

[10] Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, "The Methods of Antireligious Propaganda among the Muslims," *Žizn' nacional'nostej* (La vie des nationalités), 29 (127) and 20(128), 1921, reprinted in Bennigsen and Wimbush, op. cit., 147.

[11] Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, "The Social Revolution and the East," *Žizn' nacional'nostej* (La vie des nationalités), 38 (46), 1919, 39 (47) 1919, 42 (50), 1919, reprinted in Bennigsen and Wimbush, op. cit., 131

[12] *Ibid.*, 136.

[13] See Ian Birchall, « Un moment d'espoir : le congrès de Bakou 1920 », *Contretemps* web. Disponible sur ESSF (article 36928), [art36928](#).

[14] Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Quelquejay, *Le « sultangaliévisme » au Tatarstan*, op. cit., 139-140.

[15] Giorgi Safarov, *Kolonial'naja revolucija (La révolution coloniale)*. Opyt Turkestana, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1921, reprinted by the Society for Central Asian Studies, Oxford, 1985. Safarov had been sent to Kazakhstan in 1920 by Lenin, in an attempt to eliminate the inequalities between Russian colonizers and the indigenous populations by returning to the latter land left fallow by the former. Shortly before this, Lenin had called "all the communists of Turkestan infected by the colonizing mindset and Russian colonialism" back to Moscow. See Jean-Jacques Marie, "Quelques divagations," *Les Cahiers du monde ouvrier*, n° 46, April-May-June 2010, 143. The struggle against Russian chauvinism, against Stalin and his allies on the Georgian question, would be Lenin's "last struggle"; see Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Random House, 1968); see also Lenin's essay, "The Question of Nationalities or Autonomization," dictated in December 1922 at a time when his health permitted it, but not published until 1956:

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/dec/testamnt/autonomy.htm>

[16] An English version of Stalin's remarks at the conference, including his comments on the "Sultan-Galiev case," is available in his collected Works: J.V. Stalin, "Fourth Conference of the Central Committee of the R.C.P. (B.) with Responsible Workers of the National Republics and Regions," in *Works*, Vol. 5 (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1953), 297-348:

<http://www.marx2mao.com/Stalin/FCCC23.html>

The stenographic record of the conference - notably containing similar depositions from Sultan-Galiev and Trotsky - was published in Russia in 1992: *Tajny nacional'noj politiki CK RKP. Stenografičeskij otčet sekretnogo IV soveščanija CK RKP*, 1923 g. (Moscow: INSAN, 1992).

[17] Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, "Avtobiografičeskij očerk "Kto ja ?" : Pis'mo členam Central'noj kontrol'noj komissii, kopija - I.V. Stalinu i L.D. Trockomu. 23 maja 1923" (Autobiographical essay "Who Am I?": Letter to members of the Central Control Commission of the Party, copy for Stalin and Trotsky, May 23rd, 1923) in *Izbrannye trudy*, op. cit., 446-509.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 279.

[20] Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, "Zajavlenie v Central'nuju kontrol'nuju komissiju RKP (b) s pros'boj o vosstanovlenii v partii. 8 sentjabrja 1924 g." ("Request for Re-entry to the Party addressed to the Central Control Commission, September 8th, 1924), in *Izbrannye trudy*, op. cit., 516-522: from *Période*, available on ESSF (article 36932), [Communisme et nationalisme : une lettre du militant tatar bolchevik Mirsaid Sultan Galiev à la Commission centrale de contrôle du Parti communiste russe](#).

[21] C.L.R. James, "From Toussaint L'Ouverture to Fidel Castro," in *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 391.

[22] Alexandre Bennigsen et Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay, *Sultan Galiev, le père de la révolution tiers-mondiste*, op. cit., 221. Bennigsen and Quelquejay also mention the program of the clandestine Turkish Erk party which "contains several points directly inspired by the theories of Sultan-Galiev" (ibid., 224).

[23] Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Quelquejay, *Le « sultangaliévisme » au Tatarstan*, op. cit., 105.

[24] Ibid., 103

[25] Ibid., 180.

[26] Sultan-Galiev, cited in Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Quelquejay, *Le « sultangaliévisme » au Tatarstan*, op. cit., 180.

[27] Alexandre Bennigsen et Chantal Quelquejay, *Le « sultangaliévisme » au Tatarstan*, op. cit., 180.

[28] See Robert Landa, "Sultan Galiev," *Cahiers du mouvement ouvrier*, 19 (December 2002-January 2003), 88.

[29] Ahmed Ben Bella, the first president after independence, stated that he had been influenced by Sultan-Galiev's thought, in particular his idea of a "colonial International." In another register, in Algeria Sultan-Galiev also became the subject of a remarkable work of fiction by writer Habib Tengour, *Sultan Galiev ou la rupture des stocks*, which sees him as a close friend of Sergueï Essenine (Habid Tengour, *Sultan Galiev ou la rupture des stocks* (Paris: Sindbad, 1985).