

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State

Alexandre Bennigsen
and
Marie Broxup



Routledge Revivals

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First published in 1983, this book traces the historical and cultural development of the Soviet Muslim population. Going back to the Mongol Empire and the Russian conquest of Muslim lands under the Tsars, it demonstrates how the present Soviet Islamic culture has emerged. It also examines how Soviet Muslims interact with the Muslim world abroad and how Soviet Muftis have been used as ambassadors of the USSR in Muslim countries.

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FOREWORD

Ever since the conversion of the Khan Özbek of the Golden Horde to Islam in the early fourteenth century, marking as it does the beginning of regular and close contacts between Russians and Muslim Turks, the Muslim factor has dominated Russian history. The first period was that of Muslim pre-eminence during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the Golden Horde Khans ruled over their Russian vassals. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a certain equilibrium was achieved: the Russians captured Kazan in 1552 and in 1556 conquered Astrakhan, but in 1571 Crimean Tartars burned Moscow and in 1604 the Russians were badly defeated by the Daghestanis and the Ottomans on the banks of the river Terek. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the emergence of Russian supremacy. In the twentieth century, the attempt by the same Russians – turned Soviet – to consolidate their position and at the same time to solve, once and for all, the problem of the coexistence of two different civilisations in the same state seems set to fail. The mosaic of nationalities which makes up the USSR remains as hostile – perhaps even more so – to one another as it has ever been and the emergence of a ‘Soviet’ nation becomes more and more difficult to achieve. Only Soviet agitprop proclaims the advent of a mythical ‘Homo sovieticus’ (*Sovetskiy chelovek*), but few people in the USSR believe in this dream. A Soviet Russian remains a Russian, a Soviet Muslim simply a Muslim, not a ‘Homo Islamicus’, another mythical monster born out of the minds of some Western political scientists.

This book is an attempt to place the current problem of Soviet Islam in its historical perspective. We believe that the roots of this problem go back to the time of the Golden Horde, the conquest of Kazan, and also to the revolt of the Basmachis in 1920 and the ‘Holy War’ of Shamil. The history of Soviet Islam is long, glorious and tragic, dominated as it has been by seven centuries of conflict with Muscovy and later Russia and the USSR. This inheritance could never be annihilated by the Socialist Revolution. The past has not been forgotten, but on the contrary is still present, continuing to mould the *Weltanschauung* of the Soviet Muslims as well as that of the Soviet Russians, from the most sophisticated intelligentsia to the rural and urban masses.

We believe that a thousand years of history is crucially important to a proper understanding of the complex relationship between

Foreword

Russians and Muslims and outweighs the Marxist-Leninist 'Nationalities Policy' which has been tried out for fifty years and which now shows unmistakable signs of failing.

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INTRODUCTION

When this book is published, the Muslim population of the USSR will be between 45 and 50 million, making it the fifth largest in the world after Indonesia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, far ahead of Egypt, Turkey or Iran.

In the USSR, the term 'Muslim' is generally used to describe a people who before the 1917 Revolution belonged to the Muslim religion and culture. It has, therefore, a national and cultural significance beyond the purely religious one. A religious culture fourteen centuries old which is as deeply rooted in the popular lore as Islam, penetrating all aspects of everyday private and public life, could not and has not been destroyed in fifty years by massive anti-religious propaganda. It still permeates the psychology, the character and the behaviour of Soviet Muslims – including those who are officially considered as non-believers – and it makes them significantly different from the average Soviet Russian citizen.

Several sociological surveys conducted in recent years in the Muslim territories of the USSR have revealed the proportion of atheists among Soviet Muslims to be around 20 per cent of the population (among the Russians the figure is 80 per cent), with the remaining 80 per cent divided between various categories of 'believers': by personal conviction, by tradition or under the pressure of the family 'milieu'. But even those officially listed as 'atheists', such as members of the Communist Party, or the Komsomol, or high-level intelligentsia who are obliged professionally to fight 'obnoxious religious survival', maintain certain ties with the religion. In particular, the majority observe the three basic religious rites which mark the private life of every Muslim and which make his behaviour so different from that of his Russian or other non-Muslim comrades: circumcision, religious marriage and religious burial in a special Muslim cemetery. According to all recent surveys, these family rites are performed by 95 to 99 per cent of the Muslim population. The surveys revealing this curious phenomenon lend support to the theory that absolute atheists do not exist in Muslim lands.

Soviet Islam belongs to the very heart of the Muslim tradition. For a thousand years Central Asia and the Caucasus played a central role in the development of Muslim culture and the history of the *Dar ul-Islam*. These territories, part of the Turko-Iranian world, were the seat of

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mighty empires and brilliant centres of learning as important for the historical development of Islam as a whole as Turkey, Iran or India. It is enough that Tamerlan had his capital in Samarkand, that literary Persian was first used in Bukhara and that the greatest Muslim philosopher, Ibn Sina, was a native of Khwarezm.

Islam was brought to the territory of the present-day Soviet Union, first to Eastern Transcaucasia (Albania of the Caucasus, then in majority Christian and Mazdean) as early as the seventh century – the first century of Hijra – by the conquering Arab armies during the period of the Medina Califate. In 642, the Arabs occupied Azerbaijan and in 685 they took Derbent, which was to remain for many centuries the extreme northern frontier town of Islam facing the world of the Turkic nomads. The conquest of the Eastern Caucasus was followed by a rapid and complete Islamisation with practically no opposition. Eastern Transcaucasia remained tied to the history of the Califate and of the Iranian world as late as the Russian conquest in the nineteenth century. When Shiism became the official religion of the Safavi dynasty in the late fifteenth century, Azerbaijan followed Iran and accepted Shiism as the dominant creed of Muslim Transcaucasia.

In the seventh century, Arab armies advanced into Central Asia, a region with an old civilisation deeply impregnated by Buddhist-Manichaean and Nestorian-Christian influences. In 673 they crossed the Amu Darya, conquered Bukhara in 676 and, in 751, on the banks of the river Talas, they routed a Chinese army sent by the Tang Emperor to buttress his distant Central Asian vassals. Between 706 and 716 they took the entire sedentary territory south of Syr Darya and finally in the tenth century Islam became the religion of Central Asia with just a small group of Bukharian Jews resisting the onslaught. From this time on, Central Asia became one of the most prestigious cultural centres of the *Dar ul-Islam*.

After the Arabs, the expansion of Islam in the territory of the present-day USSR continued for thirteen centuries, as the result of the diplomatic action of the Califate (conversion of the Volga Bulgars) and later of the Ottoman Empire. Later this process was assisted by the personal missionary activity of Sufi orders from Central Asia and the Caucasus. Paradoxically, the Russian conquest of the Muslim lands between the mid-sixteenth century and 1900 did not stop the progress of Islam; it went on with relentless dynamism until by the time the October Revolution broke out it was a conquering religion, steadily spreading in Eastern Russia and making new converts among the

animist or superficially Christian Eastern Finnic population of the Volga.

Thus, for centuries, the Muslim territories of Central Asia, the Caucasus, Volga and Crimea maintained the closest possible contact with the rest of the Muslim world, sharing as they did the same culture and history, being ruled by the same dynasties and speaking and writing the same language. The Russian conquest did not fundamentally change this situation, for even as late as the nineteenth century ideas, political doctrines and individuals were constantly moving back and forth over the Tsarist Empire's southern borders with the Ottoman Empire, Iran and Muslim India. In 1917, Baku and Samarkand still belonged to the *Dar ul-Islam* and were closer to Tabriz and Isfahan than to Moscow or Petrograd.

Around 1924, an iron curtain was pulled down on Soviet Islam and for more than half a century the Muslim world has been deprived of one of its most vital constituents. Central Asia and the Caucasus were now cut off from the rest of the *Dar ul-Islam* and subjected to a complex process of modernisation and social engineering, the final outline of which is impossible to predict. Of course, the present-day rulers of Russia pretend that their treatment of Muslim territories has been a total success and that for the first time in history, former colonies exploited by an imperialist power have been integrated as equal and willing partners into a commonwealth of free socialist nations.

The same rulers claim that the new community is built on entirely novel foundations – socialist, proletarian and internationalist. All the religious, cultural, social and historical differences between partners have disappeared or should do so, to be replaced by a new Soviet culture. A new human being – ‘Soviet Man’ (*Sovetskiy chelovek*) will emerge, liberated from the past, free and happy. There will be no spiritual, intellectual or even physical difference between Russians and Uzbeks, Estonians and Kirghiz, they will share the same culture, believe in the same Marxism-Leninism, eat the same food and adore the same rulers. Soviet Man's culture will be the harmonious blending of all the best elements from all national cultures: Lenin and Andrei Rublev, Brezhnev and Ibn Sina. But in order to achieve this final solution, it is essential to protect the development of this new community, threatened as it was by various forces of evil: capitalist encirclement, clerical fanaticism, aggressive imperialists, reactionary bourgeois nationalists . . . always defeated but never totally destroyed. Soviet Muslim territories were therefore isolated from the rest of the Muslim world and Islam was condemned to disappear.

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The present essay is an attempt to assess the result of the Soviet authorities' efforts over half a century to destroy the past and to create a new basis for relations so as to ensure the survival of the Soviet Empire – if not for ever – at least for a very long period. Have they already succeeded in building this new order as claimed by Stalin several times before his death and by Khrushchev before his removal? Or are they, at least, perceptibly moving towards the 'advanced form of socialism' where local loyalties will wither away to be replaced by one supranational loyalty to Communism and to the Party? Alternatively, are the Muslim territories of the USSR simply the last colonies of a European imperialist state, which will sooner or later confront Moscow with the same insoluble problems that have plagued all other colonial powers? Will the next two decades, therefore, mark the decline of the last colonial empire in the world – the Soviet Union?

In order to give an objective answer to these vital questions, it is necessary to view Russian-Muslim relations from an historical standpoint. In doing so, it is important to bear in mind that these go back to the mid-thirteenth century, and that the Muslim 'problem' inherited by the Soviets from their Tsarist predecessors has, even after several hundred years of trying, proved stubbornly intractable.

Russian-Muslim relations are not, of course, the exclusive preserve of Moscow. It is important also to analyse the reaction of the Muslims to Russian attempts to destroy a civilisation built over fourteen centuries, ending in the latest attempt to impose a sixty-year-old Russian blend of Marxist authoritarianism that seeks to control every aspect of public and private life.

1 The Protohistory (Ninth to Twelfth Centuries)

Russia's position on the eastern flank of Europe has often been compared to that of Spain on the western side. Both are seen as bulwarks of Christendom facing the hostile world of Islam, of civilisation facing 'barbary'. Russia exhausted herself in a heroic struggle of several centuries, but this sacrifice was not to be in vain, for Europe was saved and could go on to develop its brilliant civilisation well protected by the Russians. The price of this voluntary sacrifice was heavy, since in order to survive and finally to overcome the 'Asian barbarians', Muscovy was obliged to adopt their ways, such as tyranny, despotism, serfdom and lack of liberty. Such is the picture that is painted in nearly all Russian and Soviet historical works. Far-fetched as it is, there are deep reasons for defending this absurd concept. According to the Russians, 'they have suffered more than any other people' and have 'played the role of protectors and saviours', a kind of St George killing the Asiatic dragon and rescuing the European princess. This exclusive position 'gives the Russians certain messianic rights', in particular the right to assume the leadership over their lesser European brothers and to 'civilise' the wild Asiatics.

The reality is of course far from this Manichaeic approach to history. When the ancestors of the Russians first came into contact with Asia in the ninth century they were the 'Barbarians', not the highly civilised Muslims.

In the early tenth century, the borderline between 'Civilisation' and 'Barbary' followed more or less exactly the frontier which today separates the Slavic 'European' people of the USSR from the areas populated largely by Muslims: Middle and Lower Volga, North Caucasian mountains, Derbent, Syr Daria. However, 'Barbary' at this time was represented by the 'Europeans', ancestors of the Russians. (There are those who believe that the position has altered little over time.)

For the Muslims, the 'Rus' were wild and primitive natives, purveyors of rare blond slaves and such precious raw materials as fur and ivory. But they were dangerous neighbours and their plundering expeditions (912 and 941-4 raids in the Caspian Sea, the destruction of the Khazar Empire in 945 and the 985 expedition against Bulghar) were described in gruesome detail by early Muslim chroniclers.

During 942-4 the 'Rus' devastated all Muslim Transcaucasia. Berdea, the most prosperous city of Azerbaijan, was completely destroyed and its inhabitants slaughtered. According to Ibn Hawkal, from the 1,200 merchants which existed in the town before the Russian invasion, only 5 remained. In 1850, a Russian historian, Grigor'ev, wrote:

When anarchy, fanaticism and barbarity were disputing the domination of Europe, the Khazar Empire was a centre of law, order and religious tolerance, a refuge for all those who were persecuted for their belief. It was like a brilliant meteor over the dark horizon of Europe.

In the tenth century, when Russians were still mostly pagans, Islam had already penetrated Eastern Transcaucasia and Daghestan. It had conquered the whole of Turkestan south of Syr Darya and the King of Bulghar in the far north had adopted the religion of the Prophet. Except for the Bulghar Kingdom, all these territories had long been settled with highly developed urban societies going back to the second millennium BC. Even the nomadic Turks of the Caspian steppes – the Khazars – whose feudal nobility had adopted Judaism as their official religion, had attained a higher level of political and cultural development than the ancestors of the Russians, their vassals in the eighth and early ninth centuries.

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries political and cultural equilibrium was established between the sedentary Kievian Rus, Christianised and civilised by Byzantium and the nomadic Qypchaqs (Polovtsy) – heirs to the Khazars who ruled over the Steppe territories between the Dniepr and the Aral Sea.

Contrary to the commonly accepted but totally misleading version put forward by Russian historians, relations between sedentary Russians and nomadic Turks were not limited only to plundering expeditions and punitive counter-expeditions, but included wide cultural and diplomatic exchanges between partners who treated each other as equals. Moreover, during this period Turkic princesses often married Kievian princes. (It is a well known historical fact that the vassal seeks the hand of his suzerain's daughter.) This happy period ended with the Mongol invasion, but not before a considerable number of Turkic, Iranian and even Arabic words synonymous with advanced societies were borrowed and have become so thoroughly Russified as to make it nearly impossible to recognise their Asiatic origins: *chugun, bulat, topor, sablia, saray, bumaga, khram, terem, yazyk, ochag, cherdak,*