

Muslim Life in Central Asia, 1943-1985

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The period from World War II to the rise of Gorbachev saw important changes in the realms of Islamic practice, education, and social and moral norms in Soviet Central Asia. In particular, the establishment of four geographic “spiritual administrations” to oversee and manage Muslim religious life in the Soviet Union in 1943¹, the foundation of a special state committee to oversee the affairs of non-Orthodox faiths in 1944, and the opening of the country’s only legal madrasah in 1945 (in Bukhara, Uzbekistan) inaugurated a new chapter in the history of Islam in the Soviet Union. Subsequent decades saw the professionalization of a legally registered, ecclesiastical Islamic hierarchy affiliated with the party-state, as well as the growth of unregistered networks of Islamic teachers and prayer leaders. On a broader societal level, the increased prosperity of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years (1953-1982) witnessed important social developments such as a sharp decrease in public observance of Islamic rituals and strictures (the prohibition of pork and alcohol consumption, for instance) and, in urban areas, a rise in interfaith marriage.

Muslim identity, as well as the social and religious life of Muslim communities, evolved in Central Asia during the Soviet period. Anthropologists, historians, and political scientists studying Islam in Central Asia have debated the nature of this evolution in the realms of social, cultural and political life. The analysis has tended to define the relationship between Muslims and the Soviet

¹ These being the spiritual administrations of Russia and Siberia, Transcaucasia, the Northern Caucasus, and Central Asia and Kazakstan (SADUM).

party-state as one of opposition.² Many of these scholars have asked whether Muslims engaged the party-state and Communist ideology in a spirit of uncompromising resistance sustained by their religious convictions, and therefore viewed the Soviet state as utterly alien to their values and aspirations. Soviet sources, and ethnographers in particular, saw the observance of Islamic obligations (e.g., prayer, fasting) among Muslim populations as indicators of opposition to Communist-led progress. Those scholars touching upon social history in their works also gravitated towards an oppositional representation of the impact of Soviet rule upon the values and behavior of Muslims in everyday life.

In the literature on Central Asia – which includes works by Western and other non-Soviet historians and political scientists, as well as relevant selections from the body of Soviet ethnographic literature on Islam in Soviet Central Asia - this analytical opposition has taken two forms. On the one hand, some scholars both assumed and attempted to demonstrate that the social life of Muslim communities as well as the political aspirations of Muslims remained unchanged during the Soviet period, even if the political conditions confronting them did become radically transformed. In this framework, one could not be a full-fledged Soviet citizen – loyal to the Soviet state, integrated socially and culturally into Soviet life – and a believing Muslim at the same time. This strand of scholarship stressed the implacable resistance of Muslims to Soviet rule, treating such a posture as the natural, innate, inevitable outcome of adherence to the Islamic faith in Soviet conditions. Works falling into this category presented the Muslim societies of Central Asia, and in particular rural

² Devin DeWeese has termed this body of literature “Sovietological Islamology”. He defines it as “an approach to Islam in the Soviet context informed more by scholarly expertise in the Soviet system, and into the twentieth-century development of the Soviet-defined ‘nations’ into which the Muslim communities of the USSR were grouped, rather than by training in the history or religious culture of the regions of ‘Soviet’ Islam, let alone of the broader Islamic world.” Devin DeWeese, “Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: a Review Essay of Yaacov Ro’i’s *Islam in the Soviet Union*.” *JIS* 13:3 (2002), 298-299

populations, as immune to the influence of Soviet modernity, responding to Soviet policies politically and culturally in a manner defined by pre-revolutionary values and aspirations.³

On the other hand, the literature has featured analyses that framed the Soviet-era transformation of Muslim life as so utterly radical that its products emerged from the Soviet experience as 'less' Muslim. This strand of scholarship usually did not focus on Islam exclusively. Rather, it tended to downplay and sometimes ignore the Islamic specificities of Central Asian contexts, grouping political and social trends within Muslim Central Asia under the umbrella of broader phenomena observed in the entire Soviet Union and associated with nationalist mobilization and modernization. It viewed ethnic nationalism as having triumphed over religious identity, both as a source of the most salient political mobilization and as the primary indicator of affiliation at the individual level. Further, it relied heavily on the concept of Russification, often equating the influence of Soviet modernity in Central Asia with the spread of Russian culture among Muslim communities. Thus, this type of analysis featured a general consensus that Soviet influence had somehow made Muslims 'less' Muslim – or erased the relevance of Islamic identity entirely – as individuals came out of the modern Soviet experiences of urbanization, modernization, secularization, mass repression and the rise of nationalism with a weaker religious identity and a less tenacious adherence to Islamic ritual and practices than before 1917.⁴

Both approaches share two features: they envision adherence to Islam as utterly incompatible with Soviet modernity, and they rest on the assumption that a Central Asian Muslim could not simultaneously identify on some level with Communism and Islam. These ideas preclude the

³ For better known examples from this literature, see Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (New York, 1983); Anthony Olcott (trans.), Sergei Poliakov. *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia* (Armonk, 1992)

⁴For example: Martha Brill Olcott, *The Kazakhs* (Stanford, 1995); Matthew J. Payne, *Stalin's Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh, 2000); William K. Medlin, William M. Cave, Finley Carpenter: *Education and development in Central Asia: a case study of social change in Uzbekistan* (Leiden, 1971).

possibility of viewing the history of Islam in Soviet Central Asia not only as a site of conflict, which undoubtedly existed in the multi-faceted relationship between Muslim communities and the state, but also as ground for the birth of something new. In fact, I hypothesize that large numbers of Central Asian Muslims, perhaps even the majority, not only tolerated Soviet rule and Communist ideology but actually embraced the former in a posture of loyalty and looked positively upon the latter as they understood it. This was, I believe, not only the case in the general population but also among some of those who held positions of religious authority, whether official or unofficial.

Western scholarship has advanced the general idea of the complete incompatibility of Muslim life and Soviet modernity based on its acceptance of the analysis present in Soviet materials, which consistently present religiosity as either a sign of hostility to Soviet-led progress or ignorance. Alexandre Bennigsen influenced a generation of scholars, assuming rather than arguing that the abundance of Soviet propaganda materials dealing with Islam in the Caucasus in the 1970s and 1980s reflected a rise in “Sufi” resistance to the party-state.⁵ The more recent work of Yaacov Ro’i has played a key role in introducing students of Soviet history to the inner workings of Soviet bureaucracies monitoring religion, as well as to the legal regulation of religious communities.⁶ However, the arguments and characterizations encountered in Soviet archives demand a very critical lens. In tandem with archival research, oral history can help students of Islam in the Soviet Union ascertain the extent to which bureaucratic debates recorded in documents reflected the reality on the ground in Muslim communities. I plan to rigorously analyze archival sources and to employ oral history – hitherto ignored in the historiography on religion in modern Central Asia – with this aim in mind.

⁵ Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush. *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (Berkeley, 1985)

⁶ Yaacov Ro’i. *Islam in the Soviet Union: from the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London, 2000)

More recently, scholars studying religious life in the region have begun to challenge the notion that Muslims could only conceptualize their relationship to the state in terms of resistance. Robert Crews has argued that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Muslims came to view the Tsar as a moral arbiter in internal disputes affecting Islamic communities.⁷ Crews also writes that scholarship on the Russian Empire has overestimated the speed with which nationalism became embedded among the empire's Muslim populations in the nineteenth century. He thus opens the way for a reevaluation of the importance of a non-ethnic Islamic identity in the political and social spheres. Perhaps one of the most striking messages of his recent work is that Islamic identity coexisted in harmony with a genuine sense of loyalty to the person of the Tsar.

The interpretations of Muslim life in modern Central Asia advanced by Adeb Khalid have also added layers of nuance to the historiography. In his very recent work, he has perhaps become the first scholar to point out that Central Asian Muslims did not necessarily view Islamic and Soviet identity as antithetical. His main argument, however, takes the form of a modernization narrative: what was at the beginning of the twentieth century an Islamic public space defined by Islamic identity became, by 1991, a national space, defined by ethnic nationalism, with the Islamic heritage relegated to the status of a bastion of national tradition. "Islam is nationalized."⁸ This argument bears relevance to the message of his earlier landmark work on the Jadids, the Central Asian intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who lamented what they saw as the backwardness of their surroundings in the face of Russian colonialism and the despotism of the Bukharan and Khivan amirs. Here Khalid makes the argument that the primary influence upon the Jadids came from the waves of ethnic nationalism emanating from the Ottoman Empire under the Young Turks,

⁷ Robert D. Crews. *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, 2006)

⁸ Adeb Khalid. *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 2007). See also Richard Pipes. "Muslims of Central Asia: Trends and Prospects," *Middle East Journal* (Spring 1955) p. 152

and that the Jadids developed a notion of ethnic nationalism based on the concept of a Turkic and Muslim nation.⁹

Anyone contemplating a study of Islam in Central Asia must ground oneself in the arguments presented in Khalid's two books, which have opened new doors for understanding Muslim life under Soviet conditions. Khalid has paved the way for connecting intellectual developments in nineteenth and twentieth century Central Asia with larger global trends affecting the Muslim world, notably ethnic nationalism, Islamism, and to a lesser extent Wahhabism. I nevertheless hope to critically address the manner in which he posits the respective influence of ethnic nationalism and religious identity in Central Asia's Muslim population as a whole. Rather than ethnic nationalism, my own reading of the Jadids, and notably the work of Abdurauf Fitrat (1886-1938), corresponds much more closely to C. A. Bayly's concept of regional patriotism, "the sense of loyalty to place and institutions" – a mode of affiliation which I believe is very much alive in Central Asia today.¹⁰ For one, Fitrat's passion for Turkestan's Persianate legacy – a passion which he pursued and contributed to until the end of his life - seems to complicate the picture of an emerging Turkic nationalism. Although this is not the place to pursue my interpretation of Jadid writings, one may legitimately suggest that, in the late Soviet period, Central Asia lacked the history of nationalist mobilization that one encountered in parts of the Communist world to the West.

Khalid's argument about the triumph of ethnic nationalism in Islam after Communism seems accurate insofar as it applies to the Soviet-era intelligentsias of the Central Asian republics. The evidence does indeed strongly suggest that these intelligentsias, while ultimately loyal to the Soviet state, did bear varying levels of nationalistically-motivated grievances against what they viewed as overbearing expressions of Russian nationalism within the party and suppression of non-Russian

⁹ Adeb Khalid. *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley, 1999)

¹⁰ C. A. Bayly. "Patriotism and Political Ethics in Indian History" in *Origins of Nationality in South Asia* (Oxford, 1998)

national expression, and moreover came to view Central Asian Islamic civilization as part of a 'national' legacy. However, one must also not lose sight of the fact that in Central Asia the intelligentsias did not operate with a marked level of independence from republican Communist parties. Aside from the Crimean Tatar campaign in Uzbekistan in the 1960s-1970s and perhaps some mobilization among other communities deported to Kazakstan during the Stalin era, one cannot compare them to the dissident intelligentsias active in other republics in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods. Ultimately, the party limited admission to these intelligentsias to figures with secular academic credentials. Thus, throughout Soviet history, the religious figures who before 1917 had served as the primary repositories of legal, historical, and religious knowledge had no connection to the intelligentsias in which, undoubtedly, nationalism did triumph on many levels over religion.¹¹

It may be that figures of religious authority also embraced ethnic nationalism during the Soviet period. However, to my knowledge no scholar has demonstrated this in the Central Asian context for any historical period, including the post-1991 era. In fact, my preliminary evidence gathered in the course of interviews with imams suggests at least the possibility that they did not. A number of my informants, all of whom served as imams or studied in the madrasa during the Brezhnev period, maintained that any identity constituted as independent of Islam would in fact run counter to the tenets of the faith. They also expressed the conviction that the Party had employed the ideology of nationalism to divide the previously united Muslims of Turkestan. While rejecting nationalism, these imams supported the idea of loyalty, love, and service to one's homeland.

There is the possibility that these informants have experienced the influence of Islamist ideology, which does have a well-developed critique of nationalism as a weapon of non-Muslim

¹¹ The assumption that sentiments popular among the intelligentsia reverberated within the broader population may perhaps be appropriate for certain periods of Russian and East European history. To merit application to Central Asian or other Islamic contexts, however, this assumption demands a rigorous empirical foundation.

imperialists aimed at dividing Muslims. This would suggest that before perestroika these imams would not have spoken in the same disparaging manner about ethnic nationalism. However, I consider this ‘post-Soviet’ explanation unlikely. First, as I have suggested above, the notion of loyalty to one’s homeland as distinguished from nationalism had appeared in Central Asia before. Second, Islamists never had the monopoly on an Islamically informed critique of ethnic nationalism: just such a critique emerged in the late writings of Muhammad Iqbal, among others.¹² Third, the bulk of my informants work for the spiritual administrations in their respective republics, organizations which have concerted attempts to cleanse their own institutions as well as their republics as a whole of any association with Islamism. Finally, the fact that these imams did not express any trepidation at criticizing nationalist ideology in the repressive conditions of post-Soviet Central Asia (especially Uzbekistan) strongly suggests that they did not regard their views on this matter as especially controversial but rather as a simple fact of the Islamic moral system as they defined it.

I do not seek to pay short shrift to the mobilizing power of ethnic nationalism as an ideology or to question its unquestioned importance for the politics of modern Central Asia. Rather, I wish to present the possibility, admittedly a very preliminary one at this stage, that during the Soviet period an Islamically informed critique of Soviet nationalities policy emerged in very select circles of Islamic authority.¹³ Through further ethnographic work, I will explore whether this sentiment existed among the larger population. If revered religious figures deliberately remained distant from nationalist ideology, even without explicitly criticizing it, then there would at least be a foundation to suggest that this critique generated some resonance within larger segments of society.

A second major problem I wish to tackle concerns our definition and indeed our understanding of what constitutes Islamic religiosity. This refers to an analytical distinction made in

¹² Masud-ul-Hasan: Life of Iqbal, v. 1 (Lahore, 1977), p. 401

¹³ In using the term ‘Soviet nationalities policy’, I refer to the latest interpretation in the historiography of the Soviet Union, which argues that Bolshevik policies both encouraged and rested upon the formation of national borders and institutions.

many scholarly discussions of Islam in modern Central Asia, as well as in Islamic studies more broadly, between ‘canonical’ and ‘popular’ Islam. These two, supposedly separate realms distinguish between Islam as propounded by the literate exegetes of canonized religious texts (the *ulama*), and as practiced by the masses and Sufi saints. In this framework, the latter, practitioners of ‘folk’ Islam, observe ‘survivals’ of the pagan past rather than ‘real’ Islam.¹⁴ Soviet Islamicists and social scientists studying Islam in Soviet Central Asia embraced this approach wholesale.¹⁵ Relying uncritically on these writings, Western historians of Central Asia and Islam in the Soviet Union often advanced similar arguments (or rather assumptions).¹⁶ Some scholars, however, have persuasively argued that the canonical / popular analytical division of Islam constitutes a false dichotomy.¹⁷

My approach will attempt to ask how Central Asian Muslims thought of themselves. I will gather oral histories through field work to address the question: What did it mean to *you* to be a Muslim in Soviet-ruled Central Asia? This line of questioning and discussion will focus particularly on the practices of Muslims, entailing detailed inquiry regarding pilgrimages to the shrines of holy saints, ritual feasts, prayer, education, and family life under Soviet conditions. In this manner, I will strive to ensure that the oral history component of my research encourages informants to describe their own beliefs and experiences in frames of reference that make sense to them.

I hypothesize that while the concept of ‘popular Islam’ held no meaning for most Central Asian Muslims, it constituted an important analytical tool for both the Soviet party-state and the Central Asian spiritual administration (referred to by the Russian acronym SADUM). By

¹⁴ See, for example, Edward Westermarck. *Pagan Survivals in Mohameddan Civilisation: Lectures on the Traces of Pagan Beliefs, Customs, Folklore, Practices and Rituals Surviving in the Popular Religion and Magic of Islamic Peoples* (London, 1933)

¹⁵ Some representative works are Liutsian Klimovich. *Islam* (Moscow, 1965); Talib Saidbaev, *Islam i obshchestvo* (Moscow, 1978); Ol’ga Sukhareva, *Islam v Uzbekistane* (Tashkent, 1960); Anthony Olcott (trans.), Sergei Poliakov, *Everyday Islam: religion and tradition in rural Central Asia* (Armonk, 1992)

¹⁶ Representative examples are Ro’i, *Islam in the Soviet Union* and Martha Brill Olcott, *The Kazakhs* (Stanford, 1995).

¹⁷ See Ahmet Karamustafa, *God’s Unruly Friends: Dervish Groups in the Islamic Later Middle Period 1200-1550* (Salt Lake, 1994), p. 9; Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and conversion to Islam in historical and epic tradition* (University Park, 1994); Allen Frank, *Islamic Historiography and ‘Bulghar’ identity among the Tatars and Bashkirs of Russia* (Leiden, 1998)

representing itself as the authority of a legitimate, literate Islam, SADUM's leadership sought to bolster its authority in the eyes of the state. Bureaucratic analysts monitoring religion, on the other hand, used the concept to portray religious activity occurring beyond the purview of SADUM as uncontrollable.¹⁸ This allowed them to explain and justify the party-state's inability to limit *all* religious activity in Central Asia to the severely limited premises and staff resources available to SADUM. The notion of 'popular' Islam made it possible to represent the vast array of figures unemployed by SADUM and engaging in activities with 'religious' overtones (including fortune tellers and folk healers) as a single, classifiable group aiming to undermine the achievements of the Soviet state.

The reality on the ground was not as simple as the archival documents would have us believe. My work so far would appear to indicate that SADUM exhibited less tenacity in pursuing or attempting to penalize non-SADUM figures engaged in such 'religious' activities than the state itself. This would lead to the conclusion that SADUM did not necessarily view them as a threat, whereas the state did. At the local level, the preliminary oral history research I have done suggests that SADUM employees at individual mosques held close ties with independent figures of renown.

In particular, it seems likely that the realms of registered and unregistered Islamic education interacted with one another in a complementary rather than competitive manner. Muslim education circles lacking legal sanction appear to have thrived during the Brezhnev period. Male students wishing to acquire knowledge from a teacher outside legal channels (i.e., the Mir-i-Arab madrasa in Bukhara at the primary school level and, as of 1972, the Imom al-Buxoriy Islamic Institute in Tashkent at the university level) had limited options available to them. Two types of organized elementary Islamic education existed: study of the proper recitation of the Qur'an (*tajwid*) and classes in the Arabic language. These occurred in small group classes (*hujra*) led by a teacher, which

¹⁸ See, for instance, TsGA Kirg.SSR (TsGA KR) f. 2597 o. 2 d. 110

took place in an environment of considerable fear.¹⁹ Virtually all those qualified to apply for admission to the Mir-i-Arab had studied in *hujras*; in fact, my preliminary archival evidence suggests that the muftiates regarded study in a *hujra* as a prerequisite for admission to the Mir-i Arab madrasa, the Soviet Union's only legal Islamic school from 1945 to 1972. Students who underwent this experience and who wished to further their knowledge could study with famed educators such as Muhammadjon al-Hindustoniy in Dushanbe who did not work for SADUM. However, many of my informants pursued studies with these teachers only after completing one or both of the two legally operating Islamic educational establishments.

I view the conditions engendered by Soviet policies after Stalin's death not as necessarily repressing or even hindering Muslim life but rather as facilitating the emergence of two distinct social spaces, the existence of which testifies to the social fluidity and hitherto-understated complexity of this period of Soviet Central Asian history. First, what I will refer to as Central Asian Islamic society consisted of figures of religious authority whose activities enjoyed different degrees of legal sanction or lack thereof from the state. These networks did not fall into a single hierarchy but all were loosely connected – sometimes through relationships of cooperation and at other times of animosity or competition - through their awareness of one another's activities. I believe that both the figures within this society, as well as the broader Muslim population that respected its members, did not regard it as a group split down the middle by the division between registered and unregistered. Soviet bureaucracies monitoring religion, rather than the Muslim population itself, posited that particular division. The desire of the muftiate, or at least its top officials, to monopolize control over religious activity certainly created tension within this society but, I argue, did not detract from its holistic character. I base this claim on two considerations. First, as I have already mentioned, employees of the muftiate maintained contacts of a diverse variety with unregistered

¹⁹ Informants reported that local authorities punished teachers with hefty fines and even occasional jail time, and that students experienced humiliation in school as a result of their studies.

figures. Second, it is the case that successive Central Asian muftis issued fatwas denouncing unregistered figures as un-Islamic charlatans. However, archival evidence demonstrates that Soviet bureaucracies monitoring religion participated in drafting and editing these religious opinions. Further, I have encountered no evidence, oral or archival, indicating that muftiate employees at any level cooperated with the authorities to identify, pressure or fine unregistered figures.

Large numbers of Muslims believed that the religious health of society depended on the continued activity and vitality of these figures of religious authority, whether registered or unregistered. Central Asian Islamic society as I have defined it thus constituted a kind of living sacred topography, morally supplementing the cult of deceased saints that occupies such a prominent place in Central Asian Muslim cultures. Generalized opposition to the Soviet state figured neither in the activities of the Islamic figures comprising this society nor in the aspirations of the Muslim populace that revered it; as a phenomenon it represented both a continuation of pre-Soviet Central Asian traditions of reverence for holy and/or scholarly Islamic figures, as well as a response to the murder and exile of many figures of scholarly and sacred authority in the 1920s and 1930s.

Considerably greater fluidity marked the second social space I wish to delineate, as it was not confined to figures identified with religious authority. It is thus all the more difficult to define it clearly. In urban areas, I hypothesize that there emerged a distinct form of social life that was at once Soviet, Islamic and Central Asian. People inhabiting cities who considered themselves Muslim in any conceivable way belonged to this latter group, distinguished by the unique flavor of urban life in Soviet Central Asia. It emerged as a phenomenon, at once Soviet and Islamic, as a result of the settling of Muslims and Muslim life into Soviet housing and the cultural possibilities engendered by the mass migration of Russians, Ukrainians and Muslim Tatars into expanding Central Asian cities

in the Stalin and early Khrushchev periods.²⁰ In these Soviet apartment blocks (Russian, *blok*) and yards (*dvor*) a truly ‘Soviet’ experience emerged for Central Asian Muslims. The latter regarded Slavic, Muslim Tatar, and Caucasian migrants, as well as their locally born offspring, as outsiders with respect to Central Asian Islamic tradition, yet looked upon them as sharing a Soviet culture with common rituals in the realms of education and social life (e.g., entertainment, military service, marriage ceremonies). This did not constitute Russification, for those identifying themselves with Soviet culture did not view it as explicitly Russian.²¹ It was in this sense that urban Central Asian Muslims led divided lives, excluding those with roots outside of Central Asia (irrespective of their religion) on one cognitive level but embracing them in a new socio-cultural space on another.

In traditionally sedentary parts of Central Asia this social space took on an added layer of complexity. Here, traditional, pre-Soviet modes of housing (Uzbek and Tajik, *mahalla*) - marked by long rows of single-story houses with secluded inner courtyards and long, winding streets - remained a dominant feature of the urban landscape. Migrants from other parts of the Soviet Union, as well as their offspring, resided in the *mahalla* but in drastically fewer numbers. It is too simplistic to suggest that Central Asian Muslims came to identify the mahalla as a bastion of tradition, whether national or Islamic, in contrast to the apartment blocks, as one scholar has argued and indeed as many present-day inhabitants of Central Asia will assert irrespective of their religion or ethnicity.²² Much like Central Asian inhabitants of the apartment blocks, residents of the *mahalla* also partook of certain aspects of Soviet civilization without, however, subsuming their Islamic identity underneath it.

²⁰ The region witnessed another, smaller wave in the aftermath of the great earthquake of 1966, which destroyed much of Tashkent.

²¹ By ‘Soviet culture’, I do not mean the cultural engineering envisioned and attempted by the state. Rather, a culture emerged among Soviet citizens in the form of shared experiences, independent of state control and as an indirect result of state policies (e.g., the construction of Soviet housing blocks, which for socio-economic and historical reasons tended to have multiethnic residential populations).

²² David MacKenzie Abramson. “From Soviet to Mahalla: Community and Transition in post-Soviet Uzbekistan” (Indiana Univ. Ph.D. Diss., 1998), pp. 203-4

The children that resulted from interfaith and specifically Muslim-Orthodox marriages, large numbers of whom resided in apartment blocks, also constitute an especially interesting social phenomenon as one may refer to them as ‘Soviet people’ with the greatest justification. My initial research suggests that, rather than becoming atheists or choosing one of the faiths of their parents, many of these individuals came to view themselves as both Christian and Muslim at the same time. Identifying themselves only partially with Central Asian Islamic civilization, and viewing Russian culture as distinctly alien, they, more than anyone else, embraced a non-Russocentric conception of Soviet civilization as their primary indicator of affiliation. These ‘Soviet people’ may illustrate the manner in which a syncretistic Soviet culture emerged – in Central Asia, at least - that did not correspond to the expectations of the party-state, and which furthermore was both Islamic and Soviet at once.

There existed no single Muslim community in the Soviet Union, or for that matter in Soviet Central Asia. Any analysis of Islam must make conclusions with respect to specific communities rather than Muslims as a whole, recognizing that these communities did not necessarily delineate themselves according to the boundaries of the national republics. Some past scholarship has spoken too generally of a ‘Soviet Islam’ without due attention to the complexity to be found within Muslim communities even within a single national republic. One may speak of a Soviet approach to Islam, but not of an Islam that was distinctly Soviet. In the same vein, the scholarship on Islam in the Soviet Union has almost always focused exclusively on Muslims identified in various ways as ‘practicing’ or pious. An holistic picture of Islam in Soviet Central Asia, however, requires a canvas that encompasses all the individuals who defined themselves as Muslim, including the millions who consumed pork and alcohol, who did not visit mosques until their old age, if at all, who did not observe the five ‘pillars’, and who engaged in other behavior commonly identified as ‘un-Islamic’

both by Muslims and others.²³ With the hypotheses I have presented today, I hope to develop a mechanism for mobilizing evidence with respect to specific communities or social strata without, however, losing sight of the emotional salience of those ties, both Soviet and Islamic, that bound these communities together.

In conducting my research, I will rely upon two categories of materials in addition to published sources (e.g., Soviet ethnographic literature): archives and oral histories gathered during interviews. Over the past two years, I have worked in and acquired substantial familiarity with the four Central Asian archives in which I plan to pursue research. In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, I will work in the archives of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic. Both institutions permit access to sources for every year from 1917 to 1991. I will also work in the archive of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, in which I have had access to materials related to my research up to the late 1960s. This archive has seen almost no foreign researchers, due primarily to Tajikistan's inaccessibility in the aftermath of its civil war. At the archive of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, it is similarly possible to view materials from 1943 to the early 1980s. During the course of two research trips to the region in the summers of 2005 and 2006, I have worked with archival documents from the 1940s to the 1980s produced by SADUM, the State Committee for Religious Affairs, and the central committees of republican Communist parties. Additionally, I will spend time at the State Archive of Contemporary History as well as the Central State Archive of the Russian Federation in Moscow to access the materials of central bureaucracies monitoring religion.²⁴

²³ Scholars in religious studies have recognized the problems associated with constituting adherence to certain prescribed behaviors as a benchmark for measuring piety. In criticizing works that treat Islam as having "sat lightly" on Central Asian Muslims, Devin DeWeese notes that "from an Islamic perspective there is no such thing as the purely formal or nominal or external adoption of Islam that is so often noted with disdain by students of Inner Asia." See Devin DeWeese, *Islamization and Native Religion in the Golden Horde: Baba Tükles and Conversion to Islam in Historical and Epic Tradition* (University Park, PA, 1994) p. 26

²⁴ I have worked with Harvard's extensive collections from both of these Russian archives.

I have collected oral histories through interviews during my pre-dissertation research trips and in the course of my previous experience in the region. This type of interview-based work will form an important part of my research project. I will rely on oral histories for perspectives and voices not encountered in the archives of the party-state. They will take on special importance in my attempts to understand the experiences of Muslim communities under Soviet conditions, as well as the evolution of identity. I will interview contacts I have developed in the course of my previous experience as well as individuals referred to me by these contacts. After explaining my research to informants and obtaining their consent, I will question them regarding their biographies, professional activities, and views regarding a variety of topics including Islam, Central Asia, the Soviet Union, Communism, and their attitudes toward non-Muslims (e.g., Soviet-era Russian immigrants). I will note down their recollections and characterizations of communities in which they resided and/or visited. Finally, I will employ an interviewing approach sufficiently flexible to ensure that informants have the opportunity to express views on any topic they deem relevant to my research.

I wish to devote twelve months to conducting research in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia. Of these, I intend to spend seven months in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, two in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, two in Moscow, Russia and one in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Bishkek is a logical base since it is the only Central Asian country with an accessible Communist Party archive and because materials for my period are obtainable with relative ease. I am affiliated with the American University in Central Asia in Bishkek as a Research Fellow, and therefore have access to a broad academic support base throughout Kyrgyzstan. Materials are similarly accessible in Dushanbe, where I have developed helpful contacts at the Academy of Sciences of Tajikistan, but the archive is not as large. I plan only one month for Tashkent because of the changing political climate there. When I worked at the archive in 2005, it was possible to view materials. Given the political climate, however, it will likely become increasingly difficult for American citizens to acquire visas to enter

Uzbekistan, let alone conduct research there. Depending on the situation, I may modify the number of months I spend in Tashkent. Two months in Moscow will suffice for my purposes, given that I have worked extensively in Harvard's collections from both of the archives I plan to use. I will conduct interviews in all three Central Asian countries.

The proposed research offers me the opportunity to reevaluate the consensus of past scholarship on Islam in Central Asia, and to tap archival and oral materials that have never been utilized in the literature. Far from being implacably opposed to Soviet authority and ideas, I believe that many Central Asian Muslims identified themselves both as bona fide Muslims and loyal Soviet citizens. The party-state facilitated this accommodation by abandoning the hope of completely eliminating the Islamic faith in the territory it ruled, and by working closely in partnership with an Islamic hierarchy (SADUM). My research lies at the crossroads of a number of historiographies. It engages the scholarship on Soviet history by offering insight into the anti-religious policies of the party-state, proposing a nuanced examination of the responses to Soviet rule of religious citizens, and suggesting the possible emergence of a new, uniquely Soviet socio-cultural space. It also addresses debates within Islamic and Central Asian Studies regarding the classification of Muslim practices and life and the impact upon Muslim communities of modern forms of governance. Finally, the project offers a potential contribution to our understanding of the relationship between Islam and Communism, with implications for present-day sociopolitical conditions in the region.

Appendix: Oral History Strategy

I seek to gather oral histories and recollections from Central Asian Muslims who can speak about Muslim identity and experiences in the period I am studying. Therefore, I am targeting people in their forties or older.

The scope of my project has expanded considerably over the past few months and my original plan of solely targeting informants associated with mosques consequently demands substantial revision as well. For my discussion of 'Central Asian Islamic society', however, I feel that the recollections of these people will suffice. I will recruit these particular informants through professional contacts which I developed as a Fulbright Fellow in Uzbekistan (2001-2003) and as manager of the Cultural and Religious Pluralism Program at the International Research and Exchanges Board (2003-2004), as well as through contacts I have made while at Harvard and which I will make in the future. With this group the gender distribution of the informant sample become problematic: locating female informants willing to speak with me will present difficulties as it always has in the past. Nor do I envision a solution to this hurdle, aside potentially from enlisting the assistance of an older female, Muslim research assistant.

When it comes to 'Soviet people' and Islam in the urban setting, I will have to employ a somewhat different strategy. On the one hand, any person fitting the age parameters and identifying themselves as Muslim will match my criteria. On the other hand, I will need to select an informant sample truly representative of the society at large while recognizing my own limitations timewise. I must consider samples from neighborhoods of varying degrees of affluence, both in the present and during my period of study, to determine the salience of class with respect to Islamic identity. (Class has *not* emerged as a relevant marker in my research to date i.e., my informants have not raised it as a consideration in their views on Soviet and Islamic identity.) There are a host of 'types' of informants I would ideally like to see in my pool, cutting across sociocultural, sociolinguistic, and religious lines, to determine whether these factors have any bearing on the individual's engagement with Soviet and Islamic affiliations. Aside from the 'types' I have already mentioned, I want to interview former CPSU members, non-Muslim migrants and their locally-born children, Muslims married to non-Muslims, as well as divorced Muslim women (who appear to have constituted a

prominent social group in Soviet apartment blocks), just to name a few. Achieving a gender balance with this pool will not pose difficulties.

I do not have a grand plan for locating informants in the second group. Ethnographers seem to take as standard a rather pragmatic approach to locating one's informants, pursuing contacts in one's institutional and residential surroundings or happening on them merely by chance.²⁵ Provided that I remain sensitive to the considerations raised in the previous paragraph about sample diversity, I do not see the adoption of such a strategy (if I can call it that) as doing any potential detriment to the realization of my overall research objectives.

a) Informants who agree to provide personal information

1. What is your full name?
2. Where were you born?
3. Where were you born and where did you grow up?
4. Why did you decide to devote your career to Islam (if applicable)?
5. What was your family like and what did your parents do?
6. Where did you study?
7. What kinds of religious education did you receive?
8. Describe your professional experience.
9. Were you able to pray and observe the fast while in the army (if applicable)?
10. Did the army change you and your Muslim acquaintances? How?

b) All informants

1. What do you think about Communism?
2. What do you think about Uzbek / Kyrgyz / Tajik nationalism?
3. How did most Muslims around you identify themselves in your lifetime before 1983? Where there any changes or trends you can describe?
4. How would you describe the locality or region you live in? Is it different from other localities, and why?
5. What was the level of religious observance among Muslims around you during [the tenure of a Communist party leader, or in a particular decade] and how do you define religious observance?
6. Why did Stalin permit the creation of the Spiritual Board and the Mir-i Arab Madrasa in the 1940s?
7. Many people I have spoken with speak of Brezhnev's tenure as a golden era. Why?
8. Was there religious freedom under Brezhnev?
9. The Soviet Union was arguably the most powerful state in the world. How did this make you feel?

²⁵ Marianne Ruth Kamp. *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling Under Communism* (Seattle, 2006); Nancy Ries. *Russian talk: culture and conversation during Perestroika* (Ithaca, 1997)

10. What do you think about the Spiritual Board? How effective was it in safeguarding the interests of Muslims?
11. Are Muslim in Central Asia different from Muslims elsewhere?

Projected Chapter Outline

Part 1

Chapter 1: Islam and the State in Central Asia. Topics: administration of Islam in the khanates during 18th and 19th centuries; the Russian imperial tradition of regulating and bureaucratizing Islam and Russian Orthodoxy; Bolshevik attempts to form alliances with Muslim figures in the 1920s and massive repression of Islam in late 1920s and 1930s

Chapter 2: Sacred Topography and the ‘Authenticity’ of Islam in Central Asia. Topics: sacred topography; importance of shrine pilgrimage and saints to Central Asian Muslims; diversity of Islamic traditions within Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan; debate about ‘normative’ versus ‘folk’ Islam

Chapter 3: 1943: A Reconciliation between Islam and Communism? Topics: background to the formation of SADUM; SADUM’s relationship to the Committee for the Affairs of Religious Cults; possible motivations for formation of spiritual directorates as well as madrasa; Islam and late Stalinism; legal procedures on opening or repairing mosques

Chapter 4: Onto the International Stage, 1953-64. Topics: evolving relationship between SADUM and the Party; role of SADUM in Soviet international politics; SADUM’s role in Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign, particularly with respect to unregistered figures and groups; Hajj – procedures for selecting Hajjis, Soviet state’s cost-benefit analysis of Soviet citizens taking part in Hajj

Chapter 5: Enthusiasm Mixed with Fear. Topics: the expansion of illegal Islamic education under Brezhnev; relationship of local authorities to Muslim figures; struggle of Soviet bureaucracies monitoring religion to enforce laws regulating religious activity at the local level; background to opening of the Islamic Institute in 1972

Part II

Chapter 6: A Living Sacred Topography? Topics: describe ‘Central Asian Islamic society’, consisting of SADUM and unregistered figures; significance of activities and presence of religious figures to the broader Muslim population; relations between SADUM and unregistered figures

Chapter 7: Muslim Life and the Built Environment. Topics: significance of architecture and layout of urban conditions for Muslim life; interaction of Muslims with Russians; intermarriage; observance of Islamic obligations and ‘status’ as a Muslim; exploration of changing moral and ethical values vis-à-vis Islam; constitution of Russians, and in particular Russian women, as the ‘other’; ‘Soviet people’

Chapter 8: One Faith, One Homeland: Loyalty and Animosity towards the Soviet State. Topics: discussion about resistance paradigm; Muslim understanding of Communist ideology; pride in being a Soviet citizen; examination of which categories of people were more likely to speak positively or negatively about the Soviet Union; Islamically legitimated loyalty to the Soviet Union – Soviet Union constituted as a cherished motherland

Chapter 9 [tentative]: Silent Critics: Islamically informed perspectives on Soviet Nationalities Policy

Conclusion: with reference to the changes of perestroika and independence

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