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Dissertation/Research Title: “Muslim Life in Central Asia during the Soviet Period”

1. Summary of and Introduction to Research Topic

My research focuses on Islam in Central Asia, roughly from 1943 to 1983. In 1943, the Soviet government permitted the establishment of four Muslim spiritual directorates, or muftiates, on the territory of the USSR. These were the Spiritual Directorates of the European Part of Russia and Siberia (based in Ufa), the Northern Caucasus (Makhachqala), Azerbaijan (Baku) and Central Asia and Kazakstan (Tashkent). (The Communist Party, partly because of its prejudices and stereotypes regarding Kazaks, did not conceptualize Kazakhstan as part of Central Asia.) The Central Asian muftiate was referred to by its Russian acronym, SADUM (*Sredneaziatskoe Dukhovnoe Upravlenie Musul'man*) or, more simply, in Uzbek as *Musulmonlar idorasi* (also *diniy boshqarmasi* or *diniy nazariati*). SADUM had representatives, referred to through the 1960s as *kaziats*, in all of the Central Asian republics. I have chosen my concluding date to coincide with the death of Brezhnev, who led the Soviet Communist Party from 1964 until 1983.

I am interested in cultural and social history. Particularly, I am intrigued by the study of Muslim identity, education, and culture in Soviet Central Asia. In order to understand the way I am approaching my question, it is important to understand the historiographical context in which I am writing. I am engaging with both the historiography of Central Asia as well as that of the Soviet Union.

Islam in Central Asia remains poorly understood. Scholars writing on the topic have focused exclusively on the relevance of Islam to geopolitics. As I intend to show in my research, however, geopolitics was of little relevance to most ordinary Central Asian Muslims, and thus the political science approach (unfortunately adopted by many historians as well) tells us little about what life was actually like for these people or, indeed, what their beliefs consisted of. Historians of the Soviet Union have tended to take it as a given that all people in Central Asia ‘became national’ and came to adopt

nationalism as their primary form of identity. More broadly, they have focused on the Communist Party's attempts to create a 'Soviet man' (*homo sovieticus, sovetskii chelovek*). As some historians would have it, the attempt to create a Soviet man failed because all or most Soviet people became nationalists. As I intend to show in my dissertation, the phenomenon of the 'Soviet man' did indeed have relevance to Muslim life in Central Asia, but the Soviet identity that emerged did not correspond to the goals and plans of the Communist Party.

2. Methodology

My research methodology falls into categories. The first consists of archives. I have used documents from five archives. First, I have examined materials from the collection at Harvard University of files from RGANI, the Russian State Archive of New History based in Moscow. Second, I have looked at the Central State Archive of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Tashkent. Third, in July and August of this year I availed myself of the materials at the Central State Archive of the Republic of Tajikistan. Finally, in Bishkek I have done research at the State Archive of Political Documentation under the President of Kyrgyzstan (the former archive of the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan) as well as the Central State Archive of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan. In the archives, I have relied heavily on the materials of the republican representations of the Committee on Religious Affairs under the USSR Council of Ministers. I have also used materials from the Department of Propaganda and Agitation under the Central Committee of the Kyrgyz Communist Party.

Second, I have gathered oral histories by conducting interviews with Central Asian Muslims. The only place I have done this thoroughly is in Uzbekistan. I have done these interviews either by traveling to shrines or by speaking with individual imams who I met through friends and acquaintances. I did not only interview imams, however; in fact, I have spoken with a much larger number of pilgrims. The people I spoke with are in the present-day in their 40s at youngest and in their 70s at their oldest, meaning that they were adults for some part of the period I am studying.

3. Preliminary Research Findings

- In the Soviet Union there was an Islamically informed critique of Soviet nationalities policy and of nationalism in general. By ‘Islamically informed’ I mean that there were individuals who regarded the policies of ‘nation building’ of the Communist Party as un-Islamic. Thus, one imam I spoke with in Qo’qon (Kokand), Uzbekistan told me that “before the Soviets arrived, we – Uzbeks, Tajiks, Kyrgyz, Kazaks – were all one...There is no such thing in Islam as pride in an identity that is separate from religion. If a Muslim in India or anywhere else has accomplished something, then all Muslims in the world can be proud of this.” Lest historians who believe in the inevitability and superiority of nationalism dismiss this as post-Soviet ‘modernism’, it should be noted that the respondents who expressed this view regarded it as a basic matter of dogma, not as a political opinion. Furthermore, they did not volunteer the information but only expressed their opinions after persistent questioning.
- Many Soviet Muslims loved their homeland, or more accurately the various spaces they identified as homelands, in a manner that does not correspond to nationalism. They justified this love of homeland on an Islamic basis. For the people I spoke with, loyalty to the global Muslim community did not conflict with an obligation to serve, help and love the place where one was born. On the one hand, this meant that people took pride in the local culture of the region they came from. On the other, it meant that many Muslims felt an obligation to be loyal to the Soviet Union. The archives contain speeches by representatives of SADUM arguing that Soviet Muslims must be loyal to the Soviet Union and even the Communist Party. To dismiss this as nothing other than real politics ignores the fact that such an argument was hardly without precedent in Islamic history and that, furthermore, Muslims I spoke with evinced pride in having been the citizens of such a powerful state. More commonly, I noticed that these individuals had taken pride in their ability to travel to any corner of the former Soviet Union, especially within Russia, without “being bothered by anyone” – a stark contrast to the present day status-quo, for sure.

- Throughout the period I have chosen to study, the attack on religion was a rather low priority for the Communist Party. The establishment of SADUM in 1943 implicitly meant that the Party (and Stalin) had accepted the existence of religion in the Soviet Union and ceased to realistically believe that it could be completely eliminated. After 1943, the only period of a heightened attack on religion was Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign of 1959-64. Even here, however, the goal was not so much to destroy religion as to ensure that all religious activity in the country fell under the jurisdiction of religious organizations (such as the muftiates) with ties to the Soviet government. In many instances, local authorities cooperated with SADUM during the anti-religious campaign to arrest or fine religious figures who operated independently. Throughout the entire Brezhnev era, the archival evidence I have found suggests that the Committee for Religious Affairs had difficulty getting the attention of any senior officials in the Soviet government, especially in the republican government and party apparatuses. The committee was subject to bureaucratic interference in its affairs at the republican and especially provincial levels, and its managers in Moscow could offer little support to their staff in the republics and provinces. Local party and government officials often developed their own relationships, negative and positive, with religious figures in a given area and thus totally bypassed the authority of the Committee for Religious Affairs. Senior officials in the republican capitals and Moscow were aware of this situation, but it was not enough of a priority for them to make any concerted effort to reinforce the Committee's authority.