

Methodological and Historiographical Perspectives on a Social History of Islam in Soviet Central Asia

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Note: This report I have prepared at the request of the Social Research Center presents a brainstorm of concepts that I intend to work out in greater detail with appropriate citations and references in the near future. In subsequent publications I may alter or throw out ideas appearing in this piece. In no instance should it be treated as a scholarly article or cited for any purpose whatsoever without my prior permission.

The related fields of social history and ethnohistory attempt to enrich the perspective of the document-bound historian with insight into the lives and aspirations of real people. It is fair to say that, due to the nature of their sources, historians have tended to privilege the state (or at least the lens of the state) in a wide variety of ways. Indeed, for most ordinary people the word ‘history’ calls to mind a series of dates and political events. This, perhaps, is the legacy of the slant towards political history taken by much historical writing before the twentieth century and by elementary and middle school history education through the present day.

Historians no longer conceptualize their area of study as practical politics alone, nor do they solely view cultural and social trends with a view to their political significance. Indeed, many if not most historiographies have featured significant investment on the part of scholars in the study of social history. Scholars in historiographical fields such as South Asian studies have long recognized that the social lives of historical communities can and do exist as an area conceptually autonomous from the activities, classification schemes and discursive formulations of the state. The endeavor of exploring the impact of ideology or government on people’s lives may justifiably fall under the mandate of social history, but the latter need not limit itself to the fulfillment of such an endeavor. Even in the case of an ultra-modernizing state such as the Soviet Union under Stalin, it is counter-intuitive to suggest that the social lives of people could consist of reactions to ideological influence and government policy alone. Loyalty schemes, ideological sympathies, and

relations with the state constitute only one aspect of the social life of any individual, family or community.

Central Asian studies did not exist as a discipline separate from Russian studies or Sovietology until quite recently. During the Cold War, virtually all interested Western political scientists and historians treated Central Asia as a conceptual subset of Russia. The few scholars who undertook in-depth examinations of the region did so armed with methodological and conceptual tools developed exclusively for the study of Russian politics or history or with the general theoretical debates pertaining to these disciplines in mind. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is perhaps fair to say that the closest thing to Central Asian studies as a distinct discipline existed within the Communist superpower itself, *viz.*, the impressive cadre of Soviet trained, Marxist oriented ethnographers specializing in the study of socio-religious life in Central Asia. By and large, therefore, concepts, theories and methodologies developed by Western Sovietologists and related scholars with Russia in mind received wholesale application to non-Russian and non-Slavic parts of the Union with little or no intellectual justification. In the case of specific areas such as intra-party politics or economic policy this state of affairs seemed justified, but when it came to questions of the modernization of everyday life, generational change, moral attitudes, and religion, the situation left much to be desired.

Central Asia's Cold War-era 'subset' status within Russian studies and Sovietology has had far-reaching consequences for Western academe, the effects of which remain well with us today. Any historian wishing to undertake a project concerning the social history of religion in the region must take this precedent into consideration.

First and foremost, Central Asian studies suffers from the neglect allotted to social history in general by Sovietologists and Russianists. Social history has, through the present, remained an underdeveloped and mostly ignored area of endeavor for historians specializing in Soviet studies. The few researchers who have done social history studies of Soviet-era Russia and Ukraine have framed the topic as the impact of ideology and state policies on ordinary people. It is surely unfair to blame these researchers for taking such a focus; one can also understand why Soviet studies has lagged behind other historiographies in this area. During the Cold War the means for conducting rigorous work of this kind - taking oral histories into account - simply did not exist for most scholars: published materials accessible to outsiders constituted the sole means for historians in any discipline to get a glimpse of what was going on. Social historians such as Shelia Fitzpatrick

pioneered the art of squeezing as much solid insight as one could out of the limited sources available. Also, it is undeniably true that in the Soviet Union ideology and state policies did play an enormous role in framing social, moral, and religious change for generations of Soviet citizens. Nevertheless, this surely does not explain why this area of historical inquiry has lagged behind within Soviet studies where it has blossomed in other historiographies such as South Asian, West African, and Islamic studies.

Another serious consequence of the 'subset' status allotted to Central Asian studies has stemmed from the ignorance on the part of historians of sources written (or spoken) in indigenous languages and their preference, still very strong today, for Russian. Methodologically, the use of specific languages harbors great importance for research results when it comes to certain topics. A study of political considerations in the formation of Soviet economic policy in a republican government, for example, could justifiably rely on the stenograms of Russian-language deliberations from the archives of the relevant government and party bodies. Anthropologically speaking, indigenous language sources would arguably contribute very little to such a project. For a social history of Islam, however, the anthropological case for not relying on Russian alone is very strong. Central Asian languages have developed elaborate vocabularies and idiomatic frameworks for describing religious experiences and moral issues. This descriptive toolbox is as infused with Islamic references as it is tied to the historical idiosyncrasies of specific localities. Central Asians also have a long tradition of representing their own culture to outsiders in the Russian language. Thus, interviews on religion inevitably take different directions based on the language in which the encounter occurs. I can testify to this from my own experience. Russian interviews almost always steered towards questions of politics, stability, and governance, with Russian words such as *sil'*, *vlast'*, and *klan* making frequent appearances.¹ When speaking Uzbek, however, the same informant would tend to speak about matters of the soul, of individual morality, or of the individual believer's relationship with God.

None of this means that ethnographic work conducted on Islam in Russian is of no value. Quite the contrary, such work presents great untapped intellectual potential. I know of no work on Islam in Central Asia that has posited an anthropology of language, contrasting the description of

¹ Incidentally, the word 'clan', used so often by political scientists studying Central Asia, does not exist in the Uzbek language. I also know of no translation for this word in the Qazaq language. *Ru*, the Qazaq word for tribe, is to my knowledge not used by speakers of the language to describe the geographically-based patronage networks discussed so much by outsider observers under the heading of 'clan politics'.

religion (or any other topic, for that matter) in Russian by ethnographic subjects on the one hand and in an indigenous language on the other. For the purpose of social history, however, the methodological point is that language matters. No matter how fluent or native their knowledge of the Russian language may be, many Central Asian Muslims (though certainly not all) regard it as an 'alien' tongue. This in my view explains why many Qazaqs refer to their language as *musylmansha* in conversation rather than *qazaqcha*. Ethnographers and an increasing number of historians recognize the importance of this basic methodological concern, but it seems that the bulk of historians and political scientists interested in the region would do well to take it to heart.

During the Cold War and for the most part through the present day, Central Asian studies has not benefited from advances made in the field of Islamic studies. Because many Cold War analysts considered the Islamic identity of Soviet Central Asian Muslims as superfluous, irrelevant, or at best out of place, they apparently did not believe that insights into the cultures and politics of other modernizing Muslim societies bore any connection to the region. Today only a handful of historians of Soviet Central Asia demonstrate true mastery of any of the historiographies comprising Islamic studies, and in the field of political science Eastern Europe and Russia continue, remarkably, to serve as the primary point of analytical and comparative reference. As theorists of modernization have long recognized, however, and as the historian Adeb Khalid has argued with specific reference to Central Asia, ultra-modernizing regimes and those under their rule have shared many characteristics in common in spite of ideological differences. Thus, for as Khalid points out, there are many points of comparison between the experiences of Muslims in the newborn Turkish Republic and Soviet Central Asia in the mid to late 1920s. The point is that there is no serious intellectual justification for using 1917 as a cutoff point for utterly separating Central Asian Muslims from the rest of the Islamic world. Anyone wishing to understand Muslim life and institutions in the region must know the major debates among scholars on Islam in the twentieth century and have some training in Central Asia's early modern history as well.

One of the dangers of any ethnographically based social history work stems from retrospective revision on the part of subjects. This is especially the case with a region such as Central Asia, where so many Muslims count freedom of religion as one of the great blessings of independence. In my experience conducting interviews it has been interesting to observe the strikingly small number of informants who spoke bleakly of religious life under the Soviet Union;

most of my subjects describe their lives in a balanced and seemingly objective fashion. I have, however, encountered two extremes: on the one hand, the occasional interviewee spoke at great length about the oppression meted out to Muslims throughout the entire Soviet period. On the other, some Muslims contrasted the lack of finances for religious establishments, the corruption plaguing modern Central Asia, and/or the repression of non-governmental religious figures in the present day with the economic stability and strict but relatively clear operating rules of the Soviet period. An ethnographer could interpret these retrospective characterizations with a view to the present; for the historian attempting to determine what was actually going on, however, they can serve as a source of confusion. Here the historian's trusted friend, the archive, can play an important methodological role in completing the picture provided by oral history. The point I want to make here is that, for the social historian, archives and ethnography need not be an either/or question. In fact, they can complement each other. Historians undergo training specifically dealing with how to combine different kinds of sources to produce qualified and therefore accurate conclusions. However, the idea of combining archival reports by Soviet bureaucracies on Islam together with the recollections of Muslims living in the Soviet Union has not yet been applied to the study of religious life in twentieth century Central Asia.

In sum, it can be said that Islam in Modern Central Asia is a large topic with many potential avenues for future exploration. Scholars in different disciplines have the opportunity to contribute to our knowledge on this subject armed with a wide variety of theoretical insights. However, the likelihood of our achieving major breakthroughs with respect to this topic will increase only when those theoretical approaches are supported by solid thinking about methodology. A casual approach to methodological considerations such as language and place of research will make the most elegant theoretical formulations seem laughable.