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### Studying Islam in the Soviet Union

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# Studying Islam in the Soviet Union

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# Studying Islam in the Soviet Union

*Inaugural Lecture*

Delivered on the appointment to the  
chair of Eastern European Studies  
at the University of Amsterdam  
on Thursday 11 December 2008

by

Michael Kemper

The logo for Vossiuspers UVA, featuring a large, stylized, black 'V' with a decorative flourish on its left side, followed by the text 'OSSIUSPERS UVA' in a black, serif, all-caps font.



*Mevrouw de Rector Magnificus,  
Dear guests and colleagues,*

I would like to start with the most important – my thanks to all the people who gave me a tremendous welcome here at Amsterdam University, within European Studies and far beyond. My special gratitude goes to the colleagues in my chair group of Eastern European Studies who accepted me in their special company from the very beginning. I would also like to thank Bruno Naarden, whose robe I am now proudly wearing, as well as Joep Leerssen and Michael Wintle. Under their leadership European Studies at UvA has emerged as a wonderful meeting place of the East and West of our continent.

Joep Leerssen and Michael Wintle have worked a lot on imagology, the study of how individual European nations are perceived in stereotypes and misconceptions; my lecture will be an attempt to combine the Soviet Studies of Erik van Ree, Ben de Jong and Marc Jansen with the imagology of Joep and Michael, and I will mix it up with a strong dose of Islamic Studies. How did our image of Muslims in the Soviet Union change in the last decades? How did we study Islam in the Soviet Union before its downfall in 1991, and how did Soviet scholars perceive ‘their own’ Islam? And finally, how were the two discourses related to each other? In this context we will also have a look at the state-Islam relationship in the USSR. We will see that the Western and Eastern interpretations of Central Asian and Caucasian Islam were very different, and opposed to each other. At the same time, it will become evident that the Western Sovietological and the Soviet discourses on Islam have one important point in common, namely their questionable methodology, which led to faulty results on both sides; in conclusion, we have to ask what remains from Western and Soviet studies of Islam from the Cold War period today.

## The Western Sovietologist Discourse on Islam

There were probably some fifty-four million citizens of Muslim family background in the late USSR, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The North Caucasus is geographically a part of Europe, and also the South Caucasian republics have recently moved into the European orbit. In addition, Muslims also live in European Russia, especially in the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, situated between the Volga valley and the Ural mountains. The Tatars are truly European Muslims; their conversion to Islam goes back to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, a hundred years before the Russians converted to Christianity, and long before the Tsars conquered the East of Eastern Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

The Soviet Union was built on the materialism of Marx and Lenin; its ideology can be regarded as the ultimate and extreme form of European Enlightenment thinking, and of the idea that everything is possible by technical and human engineering, that human beings can be molded according to a rational model. Religion was regarded as a 'vestige of the past'; it would be fought against by scientific persuasion or, if necessary, by force. From the mid-1920s onwards, an expanding anti-religious machinery was set in motion, and the Muslim regions were flooded with anti-Islamic posters and publications. The enforced collectivization of farm lands in the late 1920s and early 1930s was accompanied by a direct assault on the traditional Muslim communities: almost all mosques were closed down, and thousands of Muslim scholars, Imams and Sufi shaykhs were imprisoned, exiled, or executed. Muslim newspapers were eliminated, Islamic education was banned, and Muslim libraries were destroyed. The Communist Youth activists enjoyed themselves bulldozing Muslim shrines.

In the anti-religious imagery of the Militant Godless (a Soviet association which at times had more members than the Communist Party), Muslim and other religious authorities were depicted as dependent on Capitalist money, and as in return blessing the Imperialists' bombs. Islam was depicted as harmful to the believers, and as an enemy of the Soviet state. It was argued, for example, that religion prevented the development of a class consciousness among the Muslim masses, and that Muslim 'clerics' had cooperated with the anti-Soviet White Army during the Russian Civil War of 1918-1921. But Islam was considered a remnant of the past; it would be washed away by Soviet progress.

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A major goal of the early Soviet policy in Muslim regions was the banning of the traditional female clothing; the unveiling of the Muslim woman, by persuasion or by force, was regarded as women's liberation, with no regard for the women's preferences and for the vulnerable situation of unveiled women in their traditional societies.

Since the 1930s, the public arena in the Soviet Union was completely secular. And still, even the Stalinist totalitarian state was not able to eradicate Islam as a religion: it was in private, mainly in the family or at informal community meetings that Muslims continued to perform Islamic rituals like prayers and funerals, and here a minimum of Islamic knowledge was transmitted to the next generations. In addition, since the 1940s there were four official Soviet representatives of Islam: the Muftis in Ufa (for Europe and Siberia), Tashkent (for Central Asia), Makhachkala and Baku (for the North and South Caucasus, respectively). But their function was of rather ceremonial and political nature, and they were in no position to defend the religious interests of the Soviet Muslim population.

This is what we knew about Islam in the Soviet Union in 1987 when I began studying Russian and Islamic Studies. The 1970s had witnessed the rise of political Islam all over the Muslim World, culminating in the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the Islamic *mujahidin* resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Against this background the Muslim republics of the Soviet Union were a special enigma to the West: seemingly isolated from the rest of the Muslim World and under constant repression and surveillance, these nations obviously managed to maintain their Islamic identity. Would they rise again, now that Gorbachev embarked upon a liberalization of the Soviet Union?

By that time there were few Western experts on Islam in the Soviet Union. The field was left to Sovietologists, and their main interest in Central Asia and the Caucasus was to find out in how far the Muslim populations constituted a problem to Moscow's rule. Western scholars had no direct access to these regions, and they had almost no sources by Muslims themselves. To circumvent this problem, Western observers developed a two-fold approach.

First, they studied Central Asian and Caucasian Islam in the *pre-Soviet* period, on which there was a wealth of Russian colonial texts and also some Muslim sources available; and then they projected the findings of their historical research on to the contemporary Muslim societies of the 1980s.



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The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw an impressive number of Muslim rebellions against Tsarist rule in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The most significant of these Islamic resistance movements against the Russians was the *jihad* in Daghestan and Chechnya of 1828 to 1859; for over thirty years, the Caucasian mountaineers resisted Russian occupation under the leadership of three subsequent Imams, the third of which was the legendary Imam Shamil. This *jihad* movement was referred to as 'Muridism' in Russian and Soviet literature, for it was assumed that it was rooted in the relationship between a Sufi leader and his obedient disciples, who are called *murids* in Arabic. Shamil was regarded as closely connected to a Sufi brotherhood, the Naqshbandiyya; and it was assumed that this mystical brotherhood formed the backbone of the *jihad* movement, by providing the organizational framework, the propaganda apparatus, as well as the brave warriors of the Islamic resistance.

Some later uprisings in the North Caucasus and Central Asia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were brought into connection with the Naqshbandiyya as well. From these *historical* studies the conclusion was drawn that Sufi brotherhoods, with their strict hierarchies and strong discipline, are an organization of Islamic resistance *in general*. This historical image of the nineteenth-century Naqshbandiyya could easily be projected on to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

The second approach of Western authors was to make up for the lack of access to contemporary Islamic sources from the USSR regions by monitoring the Soviet press, and by using the information provided in Soviet scholarly studies on Islam. This method has of course serious challenges, for it was granted that all Soviet publications were censored and distorted by Marxist ideology. However, it was also believed that Soviet publications on Islam had a factual basis, and that these facts could, in an act of clean surgery, be extracted from their ideological context in order to arrive at a reliable picture of Islam in the Soviet Union. This was reading Soviet publications in reverse, replacing their original anti-Islamic intentions by a pro-Islamic reading. In fact, Soviet newspapers were full of references that could be interpreted as evidence of an ongoing Islamic revival in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Soviet propaganda articles against popular veneration of Sufi shrines somewhere in the remote mountains of Daghestan or in Uzbekistan could be seen as documenting an all-embracing Naqshbandiyya Sufi network that stretched from the Caucasus to Central Asia; and public speeches by Party functionaries against the persistent 'remnants of the past' could be interpreted as the Party's avowal of its helplessness with regard to Islamic activism.

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The conclusion was that Islam indeed constituted a political and military threat to the Soviet Union. One of the leading Western experts on Islam in the Soviet Union, Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, claimed that ‘Sufism in the USSR appears [in 1983, M.K.] more dynamic than sixty years ago and is probably stronger than in any other Muslim country’. According to the same author, ‘recent and reliable Soviet sources’ witness the existence of a “parallel’ or ‘unofficial’ Islam, a complex underground secret or semi-secret establishment which is much better organized and more dynamic than the official Muslim hierarchy’ [of the four Soviet Islamic administrations, the Muftiates]. Assuming that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century almost the whole population of Chechnya and Daghestan belonged to Sufi brotherhoods whose ‘discipline was purely military’, Lemerrier-Quelquejay maintained that ‘the organization remains unchanged today’, and she calculated that in the beginning of the 1980s there were still some 250.000 to half a million Sufi *murids* in the North Caucasus alone.<sup>2</sup> The supposed historical continuity with nineteenth-century Muridism suggested that these Sufis were still an underground army in the waiting.

Alexandre Bennigsen, the grey eminence of this Sovietologist Islamic school in Paris, concluded that the Sufi brotherhoods, with their ‘strong leadership and disciplined apparatus’, ‘may serve as the nucleus for communal and even national movements in the Muslim regions of the USSR’.<sup>3</sup> In their influential book, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, Bennigsen and Broxup maintained in 1983 that ‘the Muslim community of the USSR is prepared for the inevitable showdown with its Russian rulers’.<sup>4</sup> In their forecast, the Islamic political renewal will be characterized by a ‘division of tasks’ between Islamic liberal intellectuals and the inherently militant Sufi brotherhoods;<sup>5</sup> the outcome of this combination would most probably be a ‘conservative Islamic radicalism comparable to that of the present-day “Islamic Revolution” in Iran’.<sup>6</sup>

Today we know that these assumptions were wrong. The collapse of the Soviet Union was triggered by many factors, but above all by national movements in the Baltic republics. In a referendum as late as summer 1991, some 80 to 90% of the population of Central Asia opted for staying within a reformed Soviet Union. After the end of the USSR, the old Muslim communist political elites maintained their power in Central Asia, replacing the communist ideology by secular populist nationalism coupled with socialist patrimonialism. Some regional conflicts obtained an Islamic component, but nowhere in the former Soviet Union did political unrest emerge from Sufi brotherhoods.

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What we see today as political Islamic extremism in the post-Soviet region is mostly informed by Salafism, an anti-Sufi ideology that promotes the return to what is believed to be the 'fundamental sources' of Islam: the Qur'an and the sayings and traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. In their modernist and rationalist worldview, there is no place for traditional Sufism, for miracle-producing shaykhs and mystical ceremonies at the shrines of saints. 'Fundamentalism' is the enemy of Sufism; it denounces the Sufi shaykhs' claim to mediatorship between God and the believer, and it rejects the allegedly man-made traditions of the Sufi schools which, in the fundamentalists' view, have spoiled the original transcendental message of Islamic monotheism.

Why did Western scholarship fail so utterly in its analysis and predictions? It is of course easy to criticize with the benefit of hindsight; in our case, however, it is important to understand past methodological and analytical mistakes to correct our analysis of contemporary Islam in the region. After 1991, Western researchers obtained access to *Islamic* sources from the area. A new discipline emerged: Central Eurasian studies; it comprises not only historians, anthropologists and specialists in political and social studies but also experts of Islamic Studies knowledgeable in Russian and also in the vernacular and literary languages of the respective regions, especially in Turkic languages (like Uzbek and Tatar) as well as in Persian and Arabic.<sup>7</sup>

My own research was philological and historical: as a student of Russian and Islamic Studies I started investigating the nineteenth-century Muslim literature in the Volga and Ural regions of Russia around 1991. In Kazan and Ufa (the capitals of the republics of Tatarstan and Bashkortostan within the Russian Federation) the libraries still contained a huge wealth of Muslim theological, legal and Sufi writings of the Tsarist and early Soviet periods. These works were largely written in Arabic. As there had been no education in Arabic and Islamic Studies in these republics in the Soviet era, this amazing literary heritage had been completely neglected by local Soviet scholarship: our investigation into the dusty manuscript department of Kazan State University, where these books had been stored, was like jumping into an unknown ocean. Our work on the thoroughly Islamic character of the Tatar literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as on the connections of Tatar scholars to the broader Muslim World, brought me and my Western colleagues in confrontation with the established Soviet scholars who had, for decades, built up an atheist interpretation of the respective nations' literary histories, as

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well as with the new Tatar nationalists, who projected their ethno-nationalist categories back into history. Both regarded Islam just as a folkloristic part of an essentially secular, 'enlightened' national cultural heritage.<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, Soviet and nationalist interpretations of Islam are still widespread among post-Soviet scholars, just as the Cold War works of Western Sovietologists still enjoy some popularity among professional Kremlin-watchers in Europe and the US. But luckily, serious scholarship on Islam is no longer divided between East and West. The end of the USSR in 1991 led to a break-down of the academic infrastructure in the former USSR, and a to general crisis in scholarship in all of the successor states. However, a younger generation of scholars in Central Asia and the Caucasus contributed significantly to overcoming old ideological barriers, and what emerged was the beginning of a fruitful international cooperation with Western universities and institutes.

Since the early 1990s we have been involved in various international research projects together with a new generation of experts from the regions themselves, who are thoroughly revising not only the Soviet view of the history of Islam in the pre-colonial, Tsarist and Soviet periods, but also our Western assumptions. At Bochum University, for example, we conducted a research project on the functioning of Islamic education in the Soviet Union and its successor states. This project included several research groups in universities and institutes in Uzbekistan, Dagestan, Tatarstan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan as well as Russia and Ukraine (and our first results will be published in spring 2009).<sup>9</sup> What had to be developed was a new interpretation of the functioning of Islam in the Soviet Union in order to understand its survival. Here the focus needed to be placed on the mechanisms and institutions of Islamic education, that is, on the reproduction and transmission of Islamic knowledge under Soviet conditions. In addition, we were interested in Islam as a political factor, and especially in the role of those Sufi brotherhoods which had hitherto been regarded as clandestine organizations with the potential of establishing popular Islamic resistance in the military form of *jihād*.

The new sources have significantly changed our understanding of Sufi brotherhoods and their historical involvement in anti-colonial *jihād* movements. As we see it now, the importance of Sufi groups in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century resistance to Russian rule had been significantly overstated; Sufi shaykhs accompanied these anti-colonial resistance movements but rarely organized them. To my knowledge, there is only one instance where a rebellion against Russian rule was

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led by a Sufi group; this is a short-lived local uprising of 1898 in the area of Andijan in the Fergana Valley of what is today Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Andijan Uprising failed utterly; its leader, the Naqshbandiyya shaykh Dukchi Ishan, appears today as a rather erratic figure who did not manage to attract sizable popular support from the various local communities, and his *jihad* was easily crushed by Russian troops.<sup>10</sup>

In other cases we found that successful resistance leaders who had previously been designated as Sufi shaykhs of the Naqshbandiyya had no affiliations to this brotherhood at all. Even the Great Jihad of Imam Shamil in Daghestan and Chechnya, which has always been referred to as the prime example of a Sufi resistance organized by the Naqshbandiyya, appears today rather as an Islamic legal movement; Shamil's correspondences in the Arabic language, which have been unearthed and published by Russian and Daghestani scholars in the past ten years, reveal no traces of Sufism whatsoever. Rather, Shamil's thinking was centered on the introduction of Islamic law, the attempt to create an Islamic community based on the *legal* tradition of Islam. To be sure, Shamil had a close relationship to a certain Sufi shaykh, but this Sufi master, named Jamaladdin, acted rather as a moderating force on Shamil; at several occasions he tried to move Shamil towards a compromise with the overwhelming Russian forces.<sup>11</sup>

Also a rebellion in Daghestan and Chechnya in 1877, sometimes classified as a Naqshbandiyya enterprise, now appears as being launched not by Sufis but by local Muslim noblemen, who resented the increasing limitation of their authority and privileges by the Russian administration.<sup>12</sup> Sufis had no insurmountable problem with accommodating to Russian and Soviet rule, as long as they could continue their spiritual, mystical training and moral education in private. At the same time, the Russian administration, although generally suspicious of Islam and oftentimes guided by forms of Islamophobia, had no problems with Sufis: many of the Muftis whom the Tsarist government appointed as heads of their administration of Islam were known as Naqshbandis; and as a rule they stayed loyal to the regime.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, it becomes clear today that Western studies were guided by a faulty understanding of what a Sufi brotherhood is. While the Naqshbandiyya has been present in most of the regions in question, it was not a political organization, not 'the only organized political opposition to the USSR', as Bennigsen and Broxup had it,<sup>14</sup> but a very loose network of local teachers. These local Sufi masters stood in competition to each other; they struggled with each other for status, student

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numbers, and resources from the local communities. In the Soviet period, the Muslim communities developed largely in isolation from each other. In the case of the Volga region, this isolation led to the virtual disappearance of the Naqshbandiyya.

When I first visited Tatarstan and Bashkortostan in the liberal atmosphere of the early 1990s, there were no expressions of Sufism whatsoever. Soviet modernization and urbanization had successfully eliminated all Sufi links in Tatarstan; village shaykhs had disappeared, with some of their traditional medical functions taken over by post-modern 'extra-sense' spiritual healers. By contrast, in rural and mountainous Daghestan in the North Eastern Caucasus, the Naqshbandiyya did survive; in the absence of legally registered mosques, it was village shaykhs who provided the basic Islamic rituals to the local communities. However, these Daghestani shaykhs had few links with each other, and hardly any connection to the Muslim World at large. This Sufi Islam was certainly a nuisance to Soviet atheist education, for it contravened the official image of the a-religious *homo sovieticus* and questioned the success of the Soviet model of social engineering; but it was harmless to the political hegemony of the Communist Party and to the Soviet state.

### Soviet Discourses on Islam: Antireligious, Religious, and Academic

I would now like to turn to Soviet studies on Islam. What did Soviet scholars know about Islam, what could they write about, what were their interpretational frameworks? We now think it is time to study Soviet scholarship in its own right, as a specific discourse with its own constraints and opportunities; and also to compare the development of Soviet Islamic and Oriental Studies with the development of these disciplines in the West. This is the core question of a new research project that my colleague Dr. Stéphane Dudoignon (ÉHESS, Paris) and myself are currently establishing at the European Studies Department at the University of Amsterdam, with the generous support of the Dutch Scientific Organisation.

There were several Soviet discourses on Islam, conducted by authors working at different institutions, and targeted at various audiences with partly conflicting goals. Next to the crude popular propaganda publications mentioned in the begin-

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ning, there was also a *Marxist scholarly discourse* on Islam, conducted at various Communist research institutions.

During the 1920s, this discourse produced a wide variety of Marxist interpretations of the so-called ‘class character’ of Islam. The idea was to establish where, on Marx’ unidirectional ladder of human history, the Muslims were to be located: are they still in the stage of ancient slave-holding societies, or do they belong to the socio-economic formation of feudalism, or did Islam perhaps create a form of capitalism? It was believed that in order to find what kind of economic structure stood behind Islam one had to re-evaluate the early period of Islam. This was a very essentialist approach: the idea was that an analysis of Islam as it was created by Muhammad in the seventh century would reveal, for all periods of history, what Islam was standing for.

However, most of the Marxist authors of the 1920s and 1930s had no direct access to the Arabic and Persian sources of the early Islamic period. In order to make up for this shortcoming, the authors based their Marxist interpretations of Islam on the historical ‘facts’ gathered and published by Western, mostly German-language Orientalists. The common idea was that the works of ‘bourgeois’ Orientalists, like Ignac Goldziher, Theodor Nöldeke, Martin Hartmann and Leone Caetani, were wrong in their ideological framework, which was by definition ‘bourgeois’ and imperialist, but that the Western philological studies of Arabic texts were generally reliable. All that had now to be done, so the Marxist scholars in the 1920s, was to re-interpret the findings of the ‘bourgeois’ scholars within a new, Marxist framework, in order to arrive at a sound Marxist class analysis of Islam. This is basically the same method that Western Sovietologists of the 1980s employed with regard to Soviet publications, just in reverse!

By focusing on the mere ‘facts’, and allegedly rejecting the interpretative framework of Western authors, some Soviet scholars detected socialist elements in Islam, especially in the Qur’anic commands for almsgiving and social justice. Many regarded Islam as a merchant religion (a ‘World Trade Company of Believers’, as the Marxist legal scholar Mikhail Reisner put it) and interpreted the Qur’anic image of Allah as that of a mighty monopolistic capitalist.<sup>15</sup> Others argued that Islam was Bedouin and nomadic in character, and that in the mid-seventh century it was not really a religion but rather a pretext for Semitic tribes of Arabia to emigrate to the Mediterranean and further; while still others held that Islam emerged from the interests of Arab agriculturalists *against* those Bedouins and

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traders. All of these interpretations could be substantiated by references to the works of Western scholars, and all of them had implications for the question how Muslims should be treated in the Soviet Union.

This discourse was accompanied, and ultimately legitimated, by increasing state violence. Finally, during Stalin's 'Great Retreat' from 1932 onwards, Islam came to be generally considered as a 'feudal' religion that had to be exterminated. From then on it was impossible for Marxists to find any progressive elements in Islam, and most of the Soviet authors who had experimented with a Marxist interpretation of Islam in the 1920s perished during the Great Terror of the 1930s.<sup>16</sup>

There were periods when anti-Islamic propaganda was tuned down, for instance in the years of the Second World War and under most of Brezhnev's reign, and others when it was reactivated, like in the first Khrushchev years and in the beginning of Gorbachev's tenure as Secretary-General. Still, the feudal cliché remained, and it tremendously obstructed serious Soviet scholarship on Islam.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, however, the Soviets continued to maintain four Muslim administrations of Islam, the abovementioned Muftiates, and the Muftis cultivated what can be called a *pro-Islamic* Soviet discourse. This pro-Islamic discourse of Soviet official Islam co-existed side-by-side with the antireligious discourse, and often in clear contradiction to it.

Between 1943 and 1989, the Soviet administration for Islam in Central Asia and Kazakhstan was in the hands of one family, the Babakhanov 'dynasty' of Muftis. For them, the only legitimate sources of Islam were the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet, not the 'man-made' traditions of Sufism and of legal commentaries and glosses. Many of the official juridical statements (*fatwas*) of the Babakhanov Muftis were directed against what is usually called 'popular Islam' – that is, local Sufis and village saints. It was, for example, argued that in Islam, there is only one pilgrimage, namely the *hajj* to Mecca and Medina, and that accordingly all pilgrimages to Sufi shrines (which were, by contrast to the *hajj*, easy to perform even under Soviet conditions) were illicit and should be abandoned. This official Islamic 'enlightening' propaganda had its roots in Jadidism, a late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Muslim reform movement in Russia and Central Asia. Like some of the Jadidis, the Soviet Muftis maintained that there was no contradiction between Islam and modern life, and between Islam and socialism. There were attempts at rationalizing the Islamic prescriptions, for instance by pointing out the physical wisdom of the prayer prostrations (as a kind of fitness exercise) or



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of the prayer ablutions (as improving people's personal hygiene), and it was also stated that women are regarded in Islam as equal to men, and that they do not have to wear the veil.<sup>18</sup>

The legal existence of official Islamic institutions, with Muftis and *imams*, was also used as a showcase for the Muslim public abroad; the Muftiates published a propaganda journal with the title *The Muslims of the Soviet East*, which was produced not in the regional vernaculars but in various foreign languages, including in Arabic, Persian, and English, and sent to the Middle East in order to show that Islam was protected and flourishing in the Soviet Union. The necessity to display the Soviet Union as a tolerant, Islam-friendly state, gave the official Muftis and Muslim scholars in the Soviet Union the opportunity to stay in touch with the Muslim World at large; as our research project has shown, a significant number of the Islamic officials maintained contacts with universities and institutions in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and especially with the Islamic al-Azhar University in Cairo, which they visited regularly for scientific and political conferences; and several of the leading Islamic officials of Soviet Islam even studied at these institutions. Soviet official Islam was therefore well in touch with developments in the Arab world, and the reformist attitudes of the Soviet Muftis, especially the aforementioned Babakhanov-dynasty of Uzbek Muftis, were certainly influenced by the rise of Salafism and 'fundamentalism' in the Muslim World at large.<sup>19</sup>

Next to the Islamic officials in the Muftiates, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also hosted a number of other influential Islamic scholars who taught illegally, in private – at home, on their *dachas*, or in provisionary 'cells' (*hujras*) in the mosque backyards. In Western Sovietological literature, these unlicensed Muslim scholars beyond state control were usually referred to as representatives of an 'underground' or 'parallel' Islam. With increasing access to local sources, this terminology becomes questionable, for we observe a lot of interaction between licensed and non-licensed Islamic scholars in the Soviet period, and a considerable influence of 'un-official' fundamentalist scholars on the 'official' Uzbek Muftiate. Accordingly, what Western Sovietologists had described as a dichotomy of official and unofficial Islam turned out to rather be a continuum.<sup>20</sup>

The fundamentalist position of the Central Asian Muftis as well as of many private Islamic scholars against 'popular Islam' obviously played into the hands of the Soviet officials who used similar 'rationalist' arguments in their anti-religious propaganda against Islamic 'superstitions'; urban intellectual scripturalism was

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used in order to eradicate the emotional sides of Islam, the spiritual authority of rural Sufis. What was supported here was a 'clean' and individualized Islam that could easily be supervised by the state and its religious organs. And as the Sufis' audience was overwhelmingly composed of female pilgrims, I would argue that it was also a male Islam of the mosque against the female Islam of the Sufi shrines.

Let me now finally turn to the Soviet *academic* discourse on Islam, conducted by ethnologists of the Soviet Academy of Sciences and its regional branches. In how far were Soviet ethnologists working in the field able to describe Islam in a scientific way? Islam could only be studied from an atheist perspective that neglected the aspect of belief, and that concentrated instead on its socio-economic and political aspects. With regard to Sufism, this meant to stress that Sufi shaykhs were per definition exploiters and cunning religious charlatans who, at their Sufi shrines, manipulated and deceived the naïve girls and women in order to extract gifts and donations, if not more.

A typical representative for this kind of study is the work of the Russian author Sergei M. Demidov. In his work *Legends and the Truth about 'Holy Sites'* (of 1988) he describes dozens of Sufi shrines in Turkmenistan from an anti-religious perspective. At some occasions he reports about his conversations with the girls who attended these shrines; he tried to argue that the mystical rituals are nonsense, and that the legends of the saints are historically wrong. But all in vain: the Soviet believers willingly accepted his rational arguments but carried on with their rituals.<sup>21</sup> Demidov is typical for the scientific approach of Soviet official atheist propaganda, for he completely neglects the spiritual meaning of Islam for the local Muslim communities in general (and fails to understand the character of hagiographies in particular).

At the same time, some Soviet ethnologists became well aware of the fact that the official atheist propaganda was a failure, and that in Muslim Central Asia and the Caucasus, the traditional Muslim communities were rather free from Soviet state control. The most remarkable work in this context was authored by the Moscow ethnologist Sergei P. Poliakov, who conducted field expeditions into Central Asia with his team since the late 1950s. According to his own words, at one point in the early 1980s he was asked, in his function as an expert on Islam, to give a lecture to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet republic of Turkmenistan. To the embarrassed local Party leaders, he presented a memorandum that was no less than a declaration of bankruptcy of the Soviet policy on

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Islam in Central Asia. In his two-hours lecture, and in a very scientific manner with precise statistics, Poliakov exposed that the society of Central Asia not just preserved *some* Islamic elements but that it was in fact *dominated* by Muslim traditionalism, and lived in a parallel world to the official Soviet system. Muslim children were still socialized in a thoroughly Islamic spirit, with women being the main transmitters of Islamic morality and traditional norms of behaviour; and Soviet schools were very inefficient in their attempts to re-educate the younger generation in an atheist, internationalist spirit because also the teachers, and the intellectual elites in Central Asia in general, were overwhelmingly Muslim believers. Every settlement and every city neighbourhood had its underground mosque, which exerted a tremendous influence on the population; and the local authorities pretended not to notice in order not to get into trouble with Moscow, or because they were part of the Muslim traditionalist system as well.

Poliakov also analyzed the pervasive influence of the non-registered, 'underground' Islamic authorities, the imams of the non-registered mosques as well as the shaykhs of the countless Islamic shrines and holy places all over Central Asia. These shrines were mainly attended by women, who sought the blessing of the deceased and living saints for deliverance from all kinds of diseases; and it was these women who transmitted their faith to the children. Muslim traditionalism was protected by public opinion, and on the local level even enforced by the Soviet village councils of elders. In addition, Islam was supported by the economy of Central Asia. As Poliakov pointed out, it was an illusion to believe that the majority of the population worked in the state sector of Soviet economy. True, the male population of villages was formally registered as workers in the huge state farms, but this only in order to obtain a certain amount of arable land from the Kolkhozes as private plots on which they could grow their own produce for the market – a petty-bourgeois business much more lucrative than their official Kolkhoz jobs. This hidden, private economy (in the 1980s increasingly linked to speculation and corruption, in Poliakov's eyes) in turn produced the financial means to support the communal Islamic institutions and the 'parallel' Muslim leaders, the unofficial imams and shaykhs.<sup>22</sup>

At that time, Poliakov's memorandum was rejected by the Turkmenistan Party leaders, and he could not publish his text in the Soviet Union; when it finally came out in a very small edition in 1987, it was practically put under ban. Poliakov then made a decision that appeared to be very audacious: he had the manuscript

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smuggled to the West, where it was eventually published in English translation in 1991.<sup>23</sup> To Western Sovietologists, Poliakov's exposure of the weakness of the Communist system in Muslim Central Asia was more than welcome: it seemed to confirm their assumption that Islam was a threat to the Soviet system. The fact that the book was written by a convinced atheist only enhanced its credibility.

However, things are a bit more complicated. In an interview I conducted with Poliakov in 2006 in Moscow I asked him why his publication in the West did not lead to, for example, his dismissal from the Moscow Institute for Ethnology. Poliakov explained that he had been protected from possible reprisals and harassments by his own strong standing among Communist Party leaders in Moscow. Here it should be remembered that the Soviet Party leaders – especially Andropov and later Gorbachev – were highly concerned with corruption and clientelism in Central Asia; and in the mid-nineteen eighties Moscow tried to reign in, or even to replace, the most powerful of the Central Asian Party bosses. Consequently, Poliakov's publication of his manuscript in the West must not necessarily be regarded as an independent act of dissidence and disobedience; it can also be interpreted as Moscow's deliberate political use of Orientalist scholarship to embarrass the Muslim republican leaders of Soviet Central Asia, in order to curb Islam, nationalism and the growing private sector of the Central Asian economy.

In Poliakov's eyes, not the Sufis and their brotherhoods were the main 'enemy' of Soviet power but Muslim traditionalism in general. As he saw it, the scandal was that traditional Muslim conservatism had become an accepted phenomenon. He described Islamic traditionalism as a pervasive social system with a strong basis in the communal structures, and as a common attitude that even 'infected' many Party members. To be sure, the Sufi holy places were part of traditionalist Islam, and Poliakov and Demidov spared no efforts to show their pernicious influence on the world view especially of women; but nowhere do they suggest that the Naqshbandiyya was still alive as a functioning Sufi brotherhood, and even less as a clandestine organization of male warriors that might become a political or military factor. It was the illusion, and maybe the wishful thinking, of Western Sovietologists to conclude from the field work of Soviet ethnology that all these individual shaykhs and shrines formed one coherent movement which was a potential threat to the Soviet state.

## Inverted Roles: The Heritage of the Soviet Policy on Islam

Today we make the same mistake if we regard all forms of Islamic fundamentalist thought as expressions of what is often called ‘Wahhabism’ and ‘Jihadism’. The term ‘Wahhabi’ has become a convenient name used by the republican governments in Russia, the Caucasus and Central Asia for vilifying everything supposedly connected to Islamic ideologies that the state does not support. As Wahhabism is originally the name of the brand of Islam promoted by the state of Saudi Arabia, the usage of this term in the post-Soviet context suggests a direct link to Saudi oil money and foreign influence.<sup>24</sup> In particular, Chechen separatists are often called ‘Wahhabists’; seemingly, this vague designation legitimizes political and violent state repression. This terminology makes us forget that Islamic fundamentalism is a very diverse phenomenon, with expressions ranging from an Islamic academic and scholarly discourse over popular communal pietism to zealous Islamic missionary movements and, finally, militant groups. In Western media, these distinctions are rarely made. In fact, fundamentalism has historically always, and almost everywhere, been present in Muslim societies; just like Sufi esotericism, the legalistic and moralistic following of the letter of the Qur’an is part of the normal spectrum of Islamic thinking. Interestingly, in order to counteract what is regarded as the dangerous spread of political Islam, many post-Soviet republican governments today have developed a positive stance toward Sufism and popular Islam.

In today’s republic of Dagestan, almost all institutions of Islamic education as well as the republican religious directorates are in the hands of Naqshbandis, who are now regarded as defenders of a peaceful ‘traditional’ Islam against the intrusion of ‘alien’ fundamentalism from war-torn Chechnya; and also in Chechnya itself, after two wars again a republic of the Russian Federation, the former warlord and current president, Ramzan Kadyrov, supports some forms of Sufi Islam against the challenge of supposedly ‘Wahhabi’ Islamic fighters like Shamil Basaev (killed in 2006).<sup>25</sup> Also the Uzbek government of President Karimov has at times experimented with using the Naqshbandiyya as a bulwark against fundamentalism. What we see here is the longevity of the Soviet concept that the secular state defines the ‘correct’ form of Islam, and that it bans alternative religious visions by official decree. However, the most striking case of how a post-Soviet government uses Sufism as an instrument against the perceived danger of political Islam is Turkmenistan.

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President Niyazov (died in 2006), well-known for his authoritarian rule coupled with a grotesque cult around his personality, wrote a 'Holy Book of the Spirit' (*Mukaddes Rukhnama*), which he made mandatory reading for his people, at schools and even in higher education. This book is a kind of epos of the Turkmen people, a celebration of its heroic past and its customs and moral virtues with some Islamic elements. Niyazov maintained that his *Rukhnama* was a 'sacred book' given to him by God in some kind of revelation – which makes Niyazov the first and only post-Soviet president who claimed to be a prophet, in this case the new prophet of the Turkmens.

The synthesis of Niyazov's ethno-nationalist ideology and Islam is also clearly reflected in the architecture of the grand mosque he built in his native village outside Ashgabat: the minarets as well as the interior of the mosque are decorated with verses not from the Qur'an but from the president's holy book. Interestingly, Niyazov claims in his book that it was the Turkmens who created Sufism.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, what is today Turkmenistan had, especially in the 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, been home to a number of famous Sufi thinkers, and their magnificent shrines have recently been renovated by the state. Here Sufism appears as a vehicle of the state for its monopolist claim on Islam; and especially medieval Sufis seem to be politically harmless. However, the state policy of embracing Sufism does not seem to be very attractive to the population: during my visits to Turkmenistan since 2007, I found that popular veneration is much more centered on traditional small shrines in villages and neighborhoods, outside of the purview of the state, than on the gigantic monuments erected or renovated by the state.

### Conclusion: Soviet Orientalism

So what is the remaining value of Soviet writings on Islam? This is one of the central questions that we are struggling with in our new research project. At present, I am inclined to argue that Soviet writings on Islam, just as their counterparts from the Cold War period in the West, should be dismissed completely unless their findings can be supported by testimonies of the Muslims themselves. Thus Demidov's work on Sufi shrines in Turkmenistan can still be used as a touristic guide to holy places, but any information he presents must be regarded as manipulation; it is impossible to extract truthful information from a book that

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was intended as a refutation of shrine culture. Similarly, Poliakov's statistics on the influence of Islam on women and pre-school children – precise up to the second digit behind the comma – are to be regarded not as a reflection of reality but as manifestations of Soviet empiricism.

While Soviet historiography and ethnology on Islam do not have a lasting value in terms of the 'facts' that they produced, they still allow us to understand the functioning of research in the Soviet Union in a very special, heavily politicized context; and in spite of all limitations and restrictions, the Soviet discourses on Islam appear to be much more diverse than we had thought previously. At the same time, Soviet Oriental Studies now appear as the most extreme form of Western 'Orientalism'. Edward Said, in his well-known book published now precisely thirty years ago, defined British and French Orientalism as 'a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient'. The Western imagination of the 'Orient', again according to Said, produced the backwards 'Other' against which Europe, and later the United States, could define themselves.<sup>27</sup> We can say now that exactly the same holds true for Soviet Orientalism. Soviet Oriental studies on Islam, be they popular atheist or academic, were also linked to a specific set of 'institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles', similar to the ones exposed by Said.

Interestingly, the Orientalism of Soviet scholars was connected to a vehement rejection of the Western scholarly traditions of 'bourgeois' Oriental Studies; accordingly, 'Soviet Orientalism' was, at face value, *anti-Orientalist*. And still, Soviet scholars produced a new type of Eurocentric Orientalism that described Islam, just as in the West, in an essentialist fashion in terms of supposedly inherent qualities of Islam, as seen above in the context of the Marxist scholars' attempt to define the class character of Islam. In the mind of Soviet Orientalists, Muslims stubbornly refused to accept enlightenment, modernity, and progress. And even more than in the West, Soviet Orientalists put themselves at the service of the totalitarian and then post-totalitarian state, participated in the Soviet transformation of Central Asia and the Caucasus, and contributed to anti-Islamic propaganda and to the suppression of Islam. In our days, the imagery and patterns of Soviet Orientalism are still powerful, and they manifest themselves in a modified form in the curious interpretation of national Islam by Turkmenistan's late president Niyazov.

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Ironically, Soviet Orientalists and Western Sovietologists at times used the same methods: they tried to use each others' works in order to dissect what they believed were 'reliable facts' – facts that could be used to support the opposite conclusion. In the imagination of Western scholars, Sufism was dangerous to the Soviets because it was a militant brotherhood of male warriors; for Soviet scholars, Sufism was dangerous because it was an uncontrollable realm for Muslim women. This is what Soviet and Sovietologist studies on Islam had in common: both discourses disregarded their subject matter. In 1991, research on Islam in Central Eurasia had to start from the scratch, in the West as well as in the former Soviet lands.

Ik heb gezegd.





## Notes

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3. Bennigsen, 'Muslim Conservative Opposition', 345.
4. Bennigsen & Broxup, *The Islamic Threat*, 87.
5. *Ibid.*, 147.
6. *Ibid.*, 150.
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