Islam for the Atheist: a Soviet Tatar Dictionary of Islam and Its Reincarnation

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Publication date
2022

Document Version
Final published version

Published in
Socialism in One Room

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Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
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ERIK VAN REE'S LIST OF PUBLICATIONS 343
By the 1970s, Soviet atheist literature was no longer as experimental and militant as it had been in the 1920s and 1930s when it accompanied state terror. Rather than offering a grand project, atheist publications of the 1970s came with a standardized Marxist doctrine that obviously failed to capture the banality of a continuing religious life — a religious life that was heavily monitored but largely tolerated. As a result, official atheist publications of the late Soviet period are mostly uninspired and boring.¹

But in this unspectacular literature of the Stagnation era we also find some interesting innovations — in fact, innovations meant to come to terms with the enduring presence of religions. One of these innovations came in the form of a new atheist genre: that of “dictionaries of religious terms” devoted to particular religions. This genre systematically presented encompassing information about one specific confession/religion — Orthodox Christianity, for instance, or Islam, the USSR’s “second religion” — from a thoroughly scientific perspective, produced by a team of academic specialists.

In this paper² I explore the idea that a reader of such atheist dictionaries could simply ignore the blatantly anti-religious entries in these reference works, and

¹ See e.g. Yaacov Ro’i, “The Task of Creating the New Soviet Man: ‘Atheistic Propaganda’ in the Soviet Muslim Areas”, Soviet Studies 36.1 (1984), 26-44. Analyzing the atheist campaign of the late 1970s and early 1980s, Ro’i observes that “despite the evident urgency of the campaign […] and despite its greater sophistication, neither the content nor the effect of atheistic propaganda seems to be much different from that of past decades” (ibid., 40). For a much more entertaining approach to atheist propaganda see Erik van Ree, De mensenhater. Leven en sterven van de bijbelse god [The Man­hater: Living and Dying of the God of the Bible] (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Jan Mets 1997). This radical booklet — post-socialist, experimental, and perhaps even post-modernist in nature — set new standards in methodological transparency: “Also, where it was necessary I manipulated the Bible quotes, and once in a while I also intervened in the [Biblical] events” (7).

² I am grateful to Eren Tasar, Danielle Ross and Christian Noack for their comments and suggestions. A first version was presented at the online workshop Turkic: Probing the Frontiers of a Lingua Franca (17 November 2021); the discussion continued in the framework of the online symposium Soviet and
instead use the bulk of the entries as more or less neutral sources of information about religious terms and norms. The least we can say is that these dictionaries prepared the ground for the so-called “boom” of spiritual literature in the 1990s.

I focus on the case of Islam. How was Islam represented in Soviet-era dictionaries of religious terms, and in how far were these publications shaped by atheist or anti-religious approaches? My contribution starts with a brief survey of what is probably the most wide-spread Soviet encyclopedia of Islam, a booklet entitled Islam: slovar’ ateista (“Islam: Dictionary of the Atheist”) that came out in Moscow in 1988. This publication reveals what I would like to call the hybrid atheist-scholarly-religious character of the genre.

But there were also “atheist” Islamic encyclopedias written not in Russian but in the native languages of Soviet Muslims. The core of the present contribution is devoted to a specimen of this kind written in Volga (Kazan) Tatar, that is, in the Turkic language of a predominantly Muslim national minority of the RSFSR. It came out in Kazan, the capital of the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, in 1978 – which makes it the first ever Soviet encyclopedia of Islam.

Written in Tatar, the Tatar booklet was produced by Tatar Muslim Soviet authors addressing a Tatar Muslim readership – whether these writers and readers understood themselves as believers in Islam or not. How did this Tatar dictionary of Islam then engage with the particularities of the respective nationality and religion? How did it navigate between atheist and religious conceptions? And what does it mean to use a “Muslim” language like Tatar for “atheist” literature that is otherwise produced, conventionally, in Russian, a language with a religious lexicon shaped by Christian Orthodox, Latin and Western terminologies? I will try to tackle these questions by offering a thematic overview of the Tatar dictionary’s contents.

Note worthy about the Tatar edition is also that its three editions (of 1978, 1981 and 1993) spanned the Soviet/post-Soviet divide. In the last part of this contribution I therefore analyze the third edition of the Tatar dictionary of Islam, that of 1993: what had changed in form and contents after the end of the USSR, after the end of state-supported atheism, and after the arrival of liberty in religious affairs? Here I demonstrate that the hybrid atheist dictionary easily turned into a full-blown religious dictionary by just ejecting the small number of overtly atheist elements from the 1981 edition, and by introducing a few additions and stylistic changes. At the same time more processes were at work, reflecting wider changes in the relation not only between Islam and the state but also between Moscow and Kazan, and within Tatarstan’s Muslim community for whom the book was (re-) written.

For comparison: a Russian-language atheist dictionary of Islam

The most elaborate and wide-spread Soviet academic-atheist dictionary of Islam came out in 1988, in the Russian language. Entitled Islam: slovar’ ateista, it was produced by the political publishing house Politizdat, and formed part of an “atheist dictionary” series that also featured volumes on Orthodox Christianity, Protestantism and Catholicism. The title of this book (“Islam: Dictionary of the Atheist”) implies that this 1988 dictionary of Islam was written from an anti-religious position, and that it addressed atheists. Also, Islam: slovar’ ateista came in the small format of earlier Soviet “pocket dictionaries of atheism”; it could easily be taken “into the field”, where the propagandist would use it for, say, preparing

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3 Islam: slovar’ ateista, ed. M.B. Piotrovskii and S.M. Prozorov (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988). A first Russian-language dictionary of Islam had come out in 1983: this was Islam: kratkii spravochnik, chief ed. Evgenii M. Prisman (Moscow: Nauka, 1983). I do not have a copy of this work, but I would assume it came as a thoroughly political project in order to offer basic information on Islam to Soviet functionaries who had contact with the Middle East.

4 Pravoslavie: slovar’ ateista, ed. N.S. Gordinenko, I.F. Belenkin (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988);
Protestantizm: slovar’ ateista, ed. L.N. Mitrokhin, K.L. Blazhenov (Moscow: Politizdat, 1990);

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atheist lectures or interpreting what the locals told him. Many copies might have been spread for free, in particular through the activities of the Knowledge Society (Obozhevstvo Znanii), the post-WWII heir to the Militant Godless Society of Stalin’s times. Distribution might also have taken place via the Komsonol, the Writers’ Union, or educational institutions, in addition to libraries and the few academic distributors.

But was it indeed an atheist manual? A closer look reveals that the contents of Islam: slovar’ ateista were not at all dominated by openly propagandistic/ideological elements: of the 464 individual entries that it featured, I counted only about 30 entries that can easily be identified as discussing (and praising) atheism and Soviet policies towards/against Islam. To these one would have to add another 15 items devoted to biographies of Muslim Bolsheviks (and atheists, we must suppose) from regions of the USSR. Still, the remaining more than 90% of the content reflected by and large factual assessments on phenomena linked to the history, theology, and ritual practice of Islam, in addition to entries on the role of Islam in modern politics.

Given the slow pace of Soviet academic publishing we must assume that the contributions to the 1988 volume Islam: slovar’ ateista were commissioned before Gorbachev’s Perestroika – or in its first years. The persistence of late Soviet atheist restrictions is therefore also visible in what was not included in the book: the reader could find almost no references to Islam in the USSR. Obviously, the editors saw no problem in making Soviet readers familiar with Sufi brotherhoods in North Africa and Islamic parties in Pakistan, but they refrained from spreading essential knowledge about the realities of Islam in Soviet Central Asia, the Caucasus, or the Volga-Urals. At the same time the entries that did make it into the book represented the state of the art of Soviet academic Oriental studies. Indeed, most contributors of this 1988 Islamic dictionary worked at the central Institute of

Islamic Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences in Moscow (with a branch in Leningrad). In subsequent years these secular scholars of Islam would shape the Russian academic discourse on Russia’s Muslims, and on Russia’s relations to the Muslim world.


Other than the 1988 Moscow atheist dictionary in the Russian language, the Tatar anti-religious dictionary of 1978 – of which I use the 1981 edition – did not carry the term “atheist” in its title: rather, it bore the neutral title Islam dine turinda beleshmä-sielek (“An Explanatory Dictionary about the Religion of Islam”). This does not mean it was not atheist: as the preface of the 1981 edition announced, the Tatar booklet was addressing “propagandists, lecturers, agitator and organizers of atheist work”.

Like its 1988 Russian counterpart from Moscow, the Tatar dictionary of 1978/1981 was produced under the leadership of an academic institute specialized in “Oriental” history and culture – the Galimdzhan Ibragimov Institute of Language, Literature and History in Kazan, the capital of the Tatar ASSR. And like its Russian counterpart it also came in the pocket format: it was small (13.5 x 17 cm) and of little weight, with less than 200 pages. Produced on paper of low quality, the Tatar Islam dictionary was very affordable (the 1981 edition cost 35 kopeks) and had a massive distribution – as the colophon tells us, the 1981 edition was produced in 27,000 copies.

Three years later the same team also produced the first non-atheist academic Russian encyclopedia of Islam, which now appeared with Nauka, the major academic publisher: Islams: entsiklopedicheskii slovar’, ed. G.V. Miloslavskii, Iu.A. Petrov, M.B. Piotrovskii, St.M. Prozorov (Moscow: Nauka, 1991).


The most striking peculiarity of this booklet is of course that it was produced in the Tatar language: the first ever Soviet dictionary of Islamic terms came out not in Russian but in a highly marginalized national minority language. In the late Soviet period, Russian was the major language of secondary and higher education – also for the Tatars in Tatarstan. At Kazan State University, the use of Tatar was limited to the Tatar branches of the humanities, in particular Tatar history and language/literature. Tatar represented a cultural heritage that many Tatars might have been proud of – but also one that was of little practical value in the wider world. Tatar was regarded as the language of the towns and villages in the eastern countryside, beyond Russian-speaking Kazan.

The marginalization of the Tatar language coincides with the marginalization of religion: the Soviet modernization paradigm presumed that religion, too, had been pushed to the rural margins. From this perspective, if the Tatar-speaking areas were still adhering to Islam, then it must have made perfect sense to use the Tatar language for enlightening the Tatar Muslim villagers and kolkhoz workers, and to spread basic knowledge about Islam among the Tatar teachers in the regions. Another reason for using the Tatar language might have been to de-couple anti-Islamic propaganda from linguistic Russification – hoping to avoid the impression that the Soviet government just continued the anti-Islamic Russification policy of the Russian Empire. In that sense, one can say that the Tatar anti-Islamic dictionary represents a Tatar "indigenization" of Soviet atheism.

But there were also unintended consequences of this strategy to employ Tatar. In the late Russian Empire and the early Soviet Union, Tatar literature was still written (and flourishing) in a slightly adapted Arabic alphabet, but in the late 1920s the Bolsheviks enforced the transition to a Latin (Roman) alphabet, and ten years later to the Cyrillic alphabet that is still in use today. This double change was meant to cut all links to the Islamic heritage. Meanwhile Arabic and Persian loanwords were purged from the new standard Tatar language, a process that was accompanied by the massive introduction of Russian loanwords and calques. By the early 1980s, the Tatar standard language had gone through waves of ideology-driven change.

But even after these transformations, the Tatar language of the 1980s still contained a huge amount of Arabic/Persian loanwords (and so it does today). Up to this day Arabisms dominate Tatar religious terminology,8 but they are also visible in non-religious semantic fields; oftentimes the religious meaning of a given Arabic term has made way for secular, or broader, connotations. For our particular case study this means that we are talking about an atheism dictionary that explains Arabic/Islamic religious terminology in a language that – other than Russian – already contains a multitude of Arabic-origin words, without the native speaker necessarily being aware of this circumstance.

Against this background I suggest that the late-Soviet Tatar atheist dictionary massively supported the re-introduction of Islamic terminology into standard Tatar, and the re-Islamization of secularized religious terms. All this came at a time when there were very few other publications on Islam, and practically no religious Islamic publications. The anti-religious pathos of the booklet notwithstanding, the 1978/1981 atheist dictionary clearly prepared the ground for the massive return of Islamic journalism and print literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s. We could even go further and ask whether the 1981 atheist dictionary became part of this Islamic literature, setting the standard and giving the definitions for subsequent publications in fully religious genres.

In the next section I will analyze the composition of the 1981 edition, as well as the way how it treats Islam. This will be followed by an investigation of the metamorphosis of the Soviet atheist encyclopedia into a defense of Tatar Islam, in 1993.

Approaching Islam in 1981

The 1981 edition contains roughly 250 entries, which are alphabetically arranged. When we group these into semantical fields we obtain the following thematic clusters:

1) Theory of atheism, religious sociology, and Soviet legislation: this truly “atheist” cluster offers survey articles on the history and character of atheism in general, in the USSR, and in Tatarstan; on atheist education and scientific- atheist propaganda; religious sociology; materialism, deism, pantheism; freedom of conscience; anthropomorphism; Panislamism; “Muslim fanaticism”; the Muslim Spiritual Administration in Russia (i.e., the state-approved Muftiate in Ufa that, since 1788, has been regulating the work of imams and Muslim communities); 10 the Soviet Council of Religious Cults (i.e., the Soviet state’s oversight body over the Mufti); 11 as well as Soviet legislation on Islam (20 items).

2) European/Russian/Soviet Orientalists: this section includes the biographies of five important academic non-Muslim specialists of Islam, namely the famous Hungarian Ignác Goldziher (1850-1921), the Baltic German Vasilii Bartol’d (Wilhelm Barthold, 1869-1930), 12 and the Soviet scholars Evgenii Belaev (1895-1964) and Ignatii Krachkovskii (1883-1951). Equally covered is Gordii Sablukov (1803-1880) who worked at the anti-Islamic department of the Orthodox Seminary in Kazan; Sablukov’s Russian translation of the Quran was still widely used in the USSR.

3) History of Islamic thought beyond Russia: movements and schools of Islamic theology and law, including the major Sunni schools but also Shi’ism, the Ahmadiyya, the Babis and the Druzes, up to the Egyptian Nahda movement of the 19th century and the US Black Muslims (28 items).

4) Islamic personalities and authors from beyond Russia/Tatarstan, ranging from the hadith collector al-Bukhari over medieval theologians and philosophers (al-Ghazali, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd) to modernists of the 19th and 20th centuries (Muhammad ‘Abduh, Qasim Amin, Muhammad Iqbal) (12 items).

5) Islamic theology: concepts pertaining to Islamic dogmatics, including items and personalities mentioned in the Quran, as well as personalities of the time of Muhammad (53 items).

6) Islamic ritual, law and ethics, terms denoting aspects and items of Islamic practice, including prayer, fasting, marriage, divorce and funeral rites, in addition to tomb visitation/pilgrimage; Islamic taxes, Islam’s relation to women, unbelievers and innovation; Muslim dress and mosque architecture (87 items);

7) Social organization of Islam: terminology of Islamic administration, titles and honorifics of Islamic functionaries and spiritual authorities, such as mufti, qadi, mulla, ayatollah and ishan (i.e., Sufi master) (25 items);

8) Examples of Islamic literature: a random selection of popular moralistic books that can be encountered in Tatar libraries, though not all of Tatar origin (7 items);

9) Historical representatives of Islam in Tatarstan, consisting of theologians who supported a critical attitude towards traditional Islam (‘Abdannasir al-Qursawi, d. 1812; Shihabaddin al-Marjani, d. 1889) but also outspoken critics of Islam in general, including the national poet Gabdullah Tuqay (d. 1912) and some communists (Galimdzhan Ibragimov, d. 1938); to this section I also count an overview entry of Jadidism (that is, late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Muslim modernism in Russia), Qadimism (Muslim traditionalism, in opposition to the Jadids), and one on “Islam in Tatarstan” (13 items).

This profile reveals a strong focus on terms relating to Islamic ritual, law/ethics, and social organization (112 items combined), which allows us to assume that this encyclopedia was indeed designed as a guidebook for the practitioner “in the field” who needs to identify forms of Islamic practice. This anthropological/practical aspect of the book is accompanied by several historically-oriented categories, including the cluster on theology (where the early period of Islam is central; 53 items) as well as smaller clusters on global Islamic schools and movements and Muslim authors from beyond Russia, plus a few glimpses at Tatar Muslim history.
The practical and the theological/historical clusters are organized according to Arabic/Islamic terms; to give an example, the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca appears under “khaj”, and the Friday prayer sermon (Ar. khutba) under “khortba”. In contrast, the twenty items that discuss atheism and Soviet legislation are mostly introduced with the help of Russian loanwords of Greek, Latin or European origin (e.g. din sociologiya, “sociology of religion”, a composite linking an Arabic with a Latin-Russian/European loanword). Presumably adapted from Russian-language atheist manuals, these entries remain within the standard (simplified and “vulgar”) late-Soviet discourse of Marxist-Leninist philosophy.

The fact that atheist entries can easily be divided from the “neutral” items suggests that there was a division of labor between professional atheists/ideologists (who authored the atheist cluster) and professional philologists/historians (who did the non-ideological clusters). The publication does not reveal which contributor authored which entry, but the profiles of the individual contributors to the publication supports the idea that there was a clear division of labor.

According to the colophon, fifteen scholars were involved in the 1981 edition. Among these we find renowned philologists from the Institute of Language, Literature and History in Kazan, including chief editor Sh. Abilov (a Turkologist specializing in Tatar poetry of the medieval and early modern periods), Anvar Sharipov (known for his contributions to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Tatar literary history), Ravil Amirkhanov (who worked on Tatar national history and national identity), and Yahya G. Abdullin (at the time the leading Tatar historian on Judaism and the Tatar “enlightenment” tradition). An expert on Islam in the team was was G.M. Karimov (author of Sharia and Its Social Core, in the Russian language, of 1978). On the whole, these authors belonged to the late Soviet/early post-Soviet bedrock of the renaissance of Tatar national identity discourse.

A second group of contributors had a strong track record of anti-religious writings. Among these we find R.G. Balkanov (who since the 1960s published on the ideological struggle against Islamic ethics), Zinatullah Ishmokhammatov (Ishmukhametov, author of Russian-language books like Islam and Its Ideology, 1959, as well as The Social Role of Islam in Tatarstan, 1979), and A.N. Kalaganov (co-author of The History and Theory of Atheism, 1974). The composition of the team suggests these men produced the atheist entries.

Islam as a tool of oppression

Not surprisingly, the political entries contain direct and systematic denunciations of Islam as a tool of oppression. An example is the entry “The state and the religion of Islam” (Daulat hamin Islam dina, a compositum containing three Arabisms in the Tatar language: dawlat “state”, din “religion”, and islam). This entry starts right away with the ideological statement that Islam, “like other religions”, “helps to keep the workers in slavery (kabala) and to defend the rule of the exploiting classes” (52).

In another entry of this kind the contributors remind us that according to Karl Marx, religion was the only existing ideology in the Middle Ages, and embark upon a discussion of the ideological character of Islam:

Islam was accepted as exactly such an ideology [in the way Marx described it]. It was based on the belief in one Allah, on ending the hostilities between the tribes, and on the idea of uniting all Muslims. The religion of Islam became the ideological cover (ishiba, the Tatar equivalent for the Russian form obolochka that used to be employed in similar ideological statements) in the struggle for the establishment of an Arab state, and then for the military-political expansion going from Arabia into other countries (66).

Islam is then identified as the ideology of feudalism (67, 70). Its function was to sacralize (using the term izgeliskerergâ, “to make holy”) feudal rule: “The Muslim scholars of law—the faqihis—sacralized the class dominance of the feudal lords by creating the shari’a, as the Muslim legal codex that had to support the interests of the feudal rulers.” Pre-existing customary norms were easily absorbed into Islamic law (68-69).
From the materialistic perspective of the authors, Islam was clearly an instrument of the ruling class, and thus reactionary. At times, however, it also offered an ideological framework for resistance against feudalism: “The movement of peasants, plebeians and Bedouins against the feudal lords is, from an ideological point of view, reflected in the teachings of various Muslim sects (moeelman sektaları)” (68). Eventually, Muslim reformists and “Pan-Islamists” of the 19th century “attempted to employ the religion of Islam for the class interests of the bourgeoisie” (70). In result, from the perspective of historical materialism Islam appears not as an ideology in itself but as an empty shell that could be filled with any political content.

These considerations of Islam as an ideological tool reflect an earlier Marxist debate on the “class character” of Islam. Whose economic interests did Islam originally stand for? In the early years of the USSR, some Soviet scholars had argued that Islam emerged as the religion of the Meccan traders (Muhammad’s original environment), while others held that it reflected the interests of the peasants of Medina (where Muhammad developed his first community), or even of the desert Bedouins (who carried Islam into the Mediterranean world and beyond). This debate was muted in the late 1920s when Stalin started Collectivization, which also meant a full-blown attack on all Islamic institutions in the USSR, and on the Muslim elites: from then on Islam was blacklisted as feudal in nature. After the Great Patriotic War we see a return of the argument that Islamic “sects” (a category that here includes Sufi and Messianic movements) supported uprisings against the repressive feudal elites (especially if the latter were “foreign”). Finally, in the late 1970s and early 1980s – the time when this Tatar atheistic dictionary of Islam was first published – Soviet Orientalists obtained more room for investigating the role of Islam in the contemporary world, also in the light of the Mujahidin resistance against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. These international events were not discussed in our Tatar dictionary of Islamic terms of 1981; in that respect the booklet did not prepare the Soviet preacher with guidance about how to respond to questions about the USSR’s war against Islamic fighters. But the ideological disposition remained: in some of the entries, Islam was discussed as a tool in the hands of the political enemy.

We know that the CPSU’s ideological department also reflected upon whether Islamic anti-colonial forces could be turned into an ally of the USSR – in particular after the Shah’s regime was toppled by Khomeini’s Islamic Revolution. However, also on this account the 1981 publication remains silent; it retains the Bolshevik standard phrases that the Muslim clergy was inimical to the October Revolution, and emphasizes that Lenin liberated Russia’s Muslims by separating state and church (or “state and mosque”, for that matter).

Several entries of the 1981 edition underline the success of Soviet education policies, which allegedly resulted in a decline of religiosity among the Tatars. At one point we read about a “Renewal of Islam in the USSR” (SSSRda islam dineneng yangarilayi), referring to Muslim spiritual leaders who emphasize the compatibility of Islam and communism. As this entry tells us, in recent years certain Muslim preachers stipulated that Islamic duties like praying and fasting may be dropped if the work conditions do not facilitate their implementation at the prescribed times; and in their sermons they emphasize that Islam supports self-discipline and hard labor, arguing that Islamic ethics are identical with communist morality (144-145). Who made such statements is not mentioned; most probably the entry refers to some fatwas by Soviet Muftis produced on demand by State and

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16 For example, the Azerbaijani Arabist Ziya Buniatov (1921-1997) identified the Khuurramites of the South Caucasus as such a movement against feudalism. See Sara Crombach, Ziya Buniatov and the Invention of an Azerbaijani Past (PhD dissertation, University of Amsterdam, Faculty of Humanities), 2019, 95-97.
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Party. The author of this entry — probably Zinnat A. Ishmukhametov — leaves it open whether this "renewal" is a positive adaptation of Islam to Soviet ideology or just an attempt at undermining Soviet atheistic policies.\(^\text{17}\)

Yet overall, these entries of a political nature are few if compared with the mass of items that describe Islamic concepts neutrally, in a professional popular-scientific manner. Curious are entries that are factual in style but then end on an ideological note. An example of this type is the item "The end of the times" (\(\text{Akbir zamanı}\)), which first reproduces Quranic statements about the futurity and temporality of earthly life and then concludes by adding that such imaginaries were invented to scare the masses of the Muslim workers (24).

Noteworthy is that in the Tatar dictionary of 1981, almost all entries on important Islamic schools of thought and individual Islamic authors refer to movements and personalities from outside Russia, and mostly from a distant past. Paradoxically, only the openly atheist entries zoom in on the USSR and the Tatar Autonomous Republic. To be sure, there are also ten entries on Tatar Muslim personalities, and these have positive connotations — but these men are presented as critics of Islam. In fact, these personalities are meant to demonstrate that there was an indigenous development towards enlightenment (\(\text{mäğrifätchilek}\)) and atheism among the Tatars which started even before the Bolsheviks came to power.\(^\text{18}\) With other words, readers learn about Tatar Muslim atheists but not about Tatar Islamic spiritual leaders: in fact, the booklet does not mention any Muslim personality who was alive at the time of publication, not even the sitting Mufti of the Soviet Spiritual Administration of Muslims in the city of Ufa.\(^\text{19}\)

Equally, there is no mention of any historical mosque in Tatarstan. While written by Tatars, for Tatars, and in the Tatar language, the actual Tatar component in the presentation of Islam is extremely weak. This would only change with the next edition of 1993.

**ISLAM FOR THE ATHEIST**

Nationalizing Islam and Islamizing the nation: the 1993 edition

Between the editions of 1981 and 1993, the Soviet Union fell apart, the ideology of communism became discredited, and the new-born Russian Federation began developing new arrangements with Russia's national subjects (including Tatarstan) and religious communities (including Islam as represented by the muftiates). How did this impact the new edition?

Not surprisingly, the 1993 edition gave a markedly positive evaluation of Islam. The book now appeared under a simplified title (\(\text{Islam: Explanatory Dictionary}\))\(^\text{20}\) with a cover in the green color of Islam. The Cyrillic word "Islam" on the front cover was designed in a calligraphic manner that resembled Arabic script; the back cover even had the Tatar title of the dictionary (\(\text{Islam beleşmen-süzlek}\)) completely spelled in Arabic letters — a symbolic form of expressing that Tatar is a language of Islam just like Arabic is. In the early 1990s, this meant alluding to the option that

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\(\text{17}\) Formulations in this entry are almost identical to passages from Z.A. Ishmukhametov, Sotsial'nata rol' i evoliutsiya islam v Tatarii (tatarcheskoe Sobraniye) (Kazan: Tatar'skoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1979), which makes it reasonable to assume Ishmukhametov (who is listed among the contributors) authored this particular entry. His 1979 book contains a long chapter on Islamic modernism in the USSR, referring to Tatar muftis and and imams who preach that "the paradise is [nothing else but] communism" (ibid., 190), that Islam has the same work ethos as socialism (192), and that according to the sharia, men and women are equal (196). Reportedly, in 1962 the Soviet Mufti, for European Russia and Siberia issued a fatwa claiming that the Ramadan fasting is not compulsory for workers in industry, agriculture, and transport (200). From his atheist position, Ishmukhametov argued that this is in principle a good development but based on the wrong reasoning, namely that Islam just has to adapt to the new social/socialist realities. At the same time, Ishmukhametov and other atheist scholars claimed that Islamic modernists who emphasize Islam's compatibility with socialist society violate the spirit of Islam (ibid., 186; see also Abdulla Akhadow, Islam v pogone za tekhu (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo publitshekoi literaturei, series "Biblioteka Ateista", 1988), 24). With other words, Soviet atheist scholars claimed to know Islam better than the Soviet muftis!

\(\text{18}\) From among these ten Tatar personalities, only two can be counted as professional theologians: these are 'Abdannur Qúsawi (d. 1812) and Shihábuddín Marjáni (d. 1889). The entries do not depict them as atheists but emphasize their remoteness from the Islamic dogmas: Marjáni is even described as an adherent of "deism", defined as the opposition against religious fanaticism and meaningless ritual, and as the struggle for the liberation of the consciousness, protecting science and philosophy from religious bondage (43-44).

\(\text{19}\) Neither does the publication mention any of Russia's previous Muftis, not even in the entry on the Muftiates.

\(\text{20}\) Islam, Belešmen-süzlek, chief editor Zahir Shafígí, scientific editor R. Utabay-Kárimi (Kazan: Tatarstan Kitap Náshiriyi, 1993).
Tatars should go back to their pre-revolutionary Arabic script for writing their own national language.

This return to the time before Communism also shaped the content changes that came with the new edition of 1993. Not surprisingly, the six major entries on atheism and atheist education that had secured the anti-religious tone of the former editions were eliminated. Also, there were no more attempts to identify the “class character” of Islam. The book no longer claimed to address propagandists and lecturers of atheism but simply “readers interested in the religion of Islam” (p. 3). The cheap design now served the purpose of reaching a mass audience: according to its colophon, the 1993 edition had a print-run of 100,000 copies.

No wonder then that the team of contributors changed as well. Chief academic editor was now Rävil Ürük-Karimi (1933-2005), a professional Orientalist who in 1988-1991 worked at the Institute of History, Language and Literature in Ufa, the capital of the Bashkir ASSR (today Bashkortostan, hosting a significant Tatar population) but then switched to direct an Islamic school (madrasa) in Ufa, and also worked at the Central Muftiâte of European Russia and Siberia (TSüDM) that is located in the same city. With other words, while the 1981 edition was a joint venture of Tatar experts on atheism and Tatar historians and scholars of literature, the 1993 edition reflected a cooperation between more or less the same scholars of history and literature, on the one hand, and professional religious scholars, on the other – the latter partly with a background in Oriental studies. “Spiritual activists” had replaced the “atheist propagandists”.

This change does not mean that everything was rewritten – to the contrary. Largely left intact were the clusters covering concepts of Islamic theology, law/ethics, ritual as well as Islamic titles and ranks: according to my rough count, some 195 of the 250 entries of the previous edition were taken over, with no or only minor changes. Atheist remarks that had been placed at the end of an entry (as in the example given above, on “The end of the times”) were simply dropped.21

21 Even the short entry on “Muslim fanaticism” was republished, just without the last sentences that had warned the reader of the 1981 edition that Muslim fanatics regard atheists as their enemies.

Some items were updated. The entry on Soviet legislation regarding Islam was by and large retained, now with less praise for Bolshevik achievements but still silent about the brutal persecution of Islam under Stalin. A statement was added that “contemporary sovereign republics such as Tatarstan and Bashkortostan maintain their own administrations for religious information” (44-45), a vague reference to the emergence of “national muftiâtes” in Russia’s cities and regions, and to the weakening of the Soviet central TSüDM Muftiâte in Ufa in the 1990s. Again, the Mufti’s name (Talga Tadzhuddin, in office since 1980 and still in office today!) was not named – like its 1981 predecessor, also the post-socialist version of the booklet makes no mention of any contemporary Islamic personalities from the region.

One would expect that when a dictionary of Islam is no longer bound to political censorship it will expand information on Islam’s historical and contemporary diversity. The opposite is the case here. From the 28 entries of the 1981 edition that were devoted to foreign schools and historical trends of Islam, only 6 made it into the new edition. Erased were “foreign” forms of religious organization and “sects” that emerged in or out of Islam. Gone are the Ahmadiyya, the Babis, Baha’is and the Druzes – entries that had made the old edition somehow valuable for understanding international developments. Equally eliminated were the entries on the Mu’tazila school of rational theology from the ‘Abbasid era, the Zaydiyya Shi’is of Yemen, as well as the Bektashi, Naqshbandi and Melevi Sufi brotherhoods of the Ottoman Empire. In the 1981 edition, these entries on “foreign” Islamic schools had provided much historical information, and were by and large an acceptable scholarly quality. Even two global schools of Sunni law, the Maliki and the Shafi’i madhhab (the latter dominant in parts of Russia’s North Caucasus), are no longer represented in the 1993 edition. Among the few survivors were the remaining two Sunni legal schools (the Hanafi school that most Tatars would say they adhere to, as well as the “stricter” school of Hanbalism), next to Shi’ism (still without a reference to Khomeini) and Panislam (the latter now also including Tatar actors of the Tsarist era, not just Ottomans). But even
"Wahhabism" was eliminated, in spite of the fact that the 1990s saw the start of a virulent discourse on "Wahhabi" trends among the Tatar youth; presumably, many readers would have welcomed an explanation of what the new post-Soviet "Wahhabism" had to do with the historical movement of that name in Arabia.

In the post-Soviet edition, the world of Islam shrank, narrowing down to the religion of the Tatars — though not just in Tatarstan but in various parts of Russia. The elimination of the "foreign Islam" entries made space for an expansion of the "Tatar Muslim personalities" cluster. In the 1993 edition, this cluster came to include major representatives of Tatar Muslim modernism (Jadidism): the St. Petersburg imam and publicist 'Ata'allah Baiazitov (d. 1911), the Kazan reformist scholar and first Soviet Mufti Galimjan Barudi (d. 1921), the radical theologian Musa Bigiev (from Rostov-na Donu, d. 1949), the first female Qadi Mukhlisa Bubi (shot in 1937), and the celebrated Islamic publicist and biographer (and later Mufti in Ufa) Rizaeddin Fakhrreddinov (d. 1936), in addition to the founding father of Jadidism, Ismail Gasprinskii (d. 1914) from the Crimea. These names all stand for a progressive modernization of Tatar Muslim society, and for a critique of Islamic "scholasticism". The entry on "Madrasas" was now embellished with a presentation of major Jadid schools that once existed in Ufa, Kazan, Orenburg, and Izh-Bubi village (making this entry the longest in the book; pp 92-99). The entry on "Mosques" was now illustrated by examples of Tatar mosques.

No entry at all was accorded to the opponents of Jadidism — the conservative Islamic theologians of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Equally lacking are any references to the Naqshbandiyya Sufi brotherhood, which in the 19th and early 20th centuries constituted an encompassing network of relations uniting the Tatar lands and the whole of Eurasia. The only non-Jadid group that received its own entry in the 1993 edition were the Vaisovs (the "Muslim Old Believers" of Kazan), a movement of peaceful resistance against the Muslim elites under the leadership of an erratic shaykh and his ambitious sons.25

This reduction of Islam to "Tatar Islam", and even more to "Tatar modernist/Jadid Islam", is accompanied by a change of style. In the new entries on the heroes of Jadidism the sober dacty of a dictionary makes place for enthusiastic praise: the Jadids are celebrated for their service to both Islam and the Tatar nation. To give an example, the 1993 edition introduced the Jadid theologian and historian Rizaeddin Fakhrreddinov (d. 1936) as "the person who with all his energy served his people, who throughout all his life spread shining light into the heart of his native people, the famous Tatar scholar, writer, pedagogue, journalist and Orientalist (Shárek belgeche) and philosopher" (146).

In parallel to this national pathos also a new religious style entered the dictionary: Islam is suddenly spelled with a capital letter throughout the book, and the entry on Muhammad is written from a religious perspective — when mentioning the name of the prophet it even uses the Arabic eulogy ("his excellence Muhammad the messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and give him peace", p. 118). This stands in marked contrast to the 1981 edition, which still included an implicit reference to the early Soviet propaganda argument that Muhammad might never have existed — that he was just an invention of Muslim scholars (1981 edition, p. 130).

These rhetorical changes do not mean that all remnants of the Soviet style were gone. In several cases we still find the bulky constructions Islam dinen toutchi ("the person who maintains the faith of Islam", e.g. page 56) or dinâ išanucht keshe ("a person who believes in religion", 121), which had been used in the 1981 edition in order to avoid the use of "Muslims" (müslêmnar) or "believers" (müminnân) when speaking exclusively about observing Muslims. Finally, the 1993 edition also


25 Khizrâte Mükämînâv, râşıkâtâladâh Sallâlâddînî gâysîya tâslâmî, the expression that was reintroduced in the early 1990s to render the Arabic formula hadat Muhammad istûl Allah sella Allah 'ale żywa wa-sellâm.
includes a brief appendix, reproducing a work by the aforementioned Rizaeddin Fakhreddinov, "What kind of religion is Islam?" (Islam dini nindi dini, 181-185), an exposition of Islam’s essence, plus a list of recommended literature compiled by editor Utábay-Kárimi and one of his associates (186-191). The dictionary here assumed the function of an Islamic primer, with Fakhreddinov as the teacher.

Obviously, the 1993 edition clearly addressed Tatars who were searching for basic information about the religion of their grandparents, and who were possibly toying with the idea of identifying themselves not just as Tatars but also as believers. This missionary effort is most explicit in the following reflection, placed at the end of the entry on “Islam”:

Who can call himself a Muslim? In our time, this question is particular important, and it calls for an answer. On the one hand, the issue is pretty clear: a person is Muslim if he believes in Allah’s existence and His unity, if he acknowledges Muhammad’s prophethood, and if he respects the five pillars of Islam. In many countries this would be enough. But who are the sons, daughters, and grandchildren of the Muslims who live in this union of sovereign states? Until recently they lived under the influence of the atheism that dominated in this country. Unable to obtain knowledge about religion they were not getting acquainted with religious teaching. But at times they conducted some religious rituals by simply following the example of their parents. In their hearts they maintained respect for this particular religion, and they did not embrace Christianity, Buddhism or any other religion, and did not participate in rituals of other religions. For this reason it would be wrong to regard these people as atheists, and to say that they do not have a religion. For they feel as Muslims, and with every new year they get more actively involved in [Islamic] religious rituals; and they donate money for the establishment of new mosques. This is a half-atheist youth that grew up under the influence of Muslims; they can also be counted among the Muslims (56).

25 [That is, the testimony of God and Muhammad, the five daily prayers, the fasting of Ramadan, the pilgrimage to Mecca, and the zakat charity tax.]
26 The “Union of sovereign states” is a reference to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) of which Yeltsin’s Russian Federation was a founding member.

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What we see here is a very inclusive definition of Islam, emphasizing that a Muslim does not have to be thoroughly versed in Islamic theology, and does not have to perform the Islamic rituals, to feel like a Muslim and therefore to be a Muslim; also a “half-atheist” can rightfully call herself Muslim, and gradually “get into” the Islamic duties. With statements like this the dictionary takes on the functions of a missionary’s sermon.

Conclusion

In October 2021 – while I was finalizing the present paper for publication – Eren Tasar published a thorough analysis of the genre of late Soviet and post-Soviet dictionaries of Islam, mainly from Central Asia.27 Tasar draws on a significant number of reference books on Islam in various Turkic languages of Soviet Central Asia, including Mutolib A. Usmonov’s Islam: spravochnik (Tashkent, 1989). I was relieved to see that Tasar’s findings are very similar to mine, also with regard to the long afterlife of Soviet styles of writing about Islam across the 1991 divide. In particular, Tasar emphasizes that “through the embrace of ambiguity and contradiction, the Islamic dictionaries of the Soviet and post-Soviet eras […] generated a discursive field for talking about Islam that is at once Muslim and atheist” (334, emphasis mine). In that sense the dictionaries were both Muslim and atheist at the same time – and individual authors, like the above-mentioned Uzbek scholar Usmonov, managed to play both repertoires. As Tasar suggests, the dictionaries defined

“a community of ideas and personnel that I refer to as ‘Muslim atheism’. This community’s defining feature […] is not its hostility or prescriptiveness towards Islam, but rather its deliberate deployment of ambiguity to create a tacit

community of ideas open to atheistic academics, Islamic scholars, and ordinary believers” (353).

My own take is slightly different in that I argue that in the Tatar dictionaries, the atheist entries were produced by designated specialists of atheism; that is, I do not find evidence that one and the same author produced both openly negative and neutral or “Muslim” appraisals of Islam in the same book. In that sense I would say that the Tatar publications were not both “Muslim-and-atheist” at the same time (as Eren Tasar would have it) but “partly atheist, partly indifferent, partly religious, next to each other” in an awkward constellation that was, after all, still a product of the propaganda state, and necessitated by the state’s inability to ignore the persistence of religious expression among Soviet citizens. This also implies two different authorships and two different readerships, not one Muslim-and-atheist community united in one discursive field.

Anyway, these are nuances. The hybridity inherent in the 1978/1981 edition – its combination of ideological but also “neutral” and scholarly elements – constituted a disposition that made it possible to easily change the purpose of the book: by 1993, the third edition of the “atheist” Tatar Islam dictionary had become an open tool to facilitate the personal and national recovery of Islam. One bias made place for another; this is visible in both what is in the dictionary, and in what was eliminated or omitted. This change is also reflected in the composition of the editorial team, where atheist writers were replaced by religious teachers.

Would it be appropriate to say that Islam filled the ideological void that emerged when communism had dissipated? As seen above, the 1981 edition that defined Islam as a powerful instrument of reactionary political forces, as an ideology that defended the interests of ruling (“feudal” or “bourgeois”) elites against the powers of “progress”. In the 1993 edition, Islam was no longer criticized as an ideological tool – all the while it was presented as an ideology, namely as the natural worldview of the cultural and political Tatar nation. With the elimination of the “foreign Islam” entries, Islam was narrowed down to Tatar national resilience, with primacy being accorded to the ethnic component. The major innovation of the 1993 edition was the enthusiastic appraisal of a number of reformist (“progressive”) Tatar Muslim intellectuals and politicians of the late imperial and early Soviet eras, who were portrayed as the leaders of the Tatar nation. “Progress” was no longer moving away from Islam but to the contrary, embracing and defending it. This siding with Tatar Muslim reformism and renewal was already present in the 1981 edition, albeit in embryonic form and in secular language, and without biographies of the Jadid heroes.

All subtractions, omissions and additions notwithstanding it remains noteworthy that almost 80% of the individual entries of 1981 remained largely the same in the 1993 edition. If this corpus of entries survived the filtering out of atheist rhetoric, maybe already the 1981 edition should be seen as a veritable recovery of Islam from Bolshevik defamation? Already in the early 1980s it must have been easy for a religious reader to ignore the overly atheistic entries – all the more since these entries were marked by their headings (such as “Ateizm”, “Ateizm markistelarcha”, “Ateizm SSSRda”). It might not be an exaggeration to say that with a print run of 27,000, the 1981 booklet spread more knowledge about Islam than the Soviet Muftiate in Ufa at the time. In that sense already the 1981 edition was a real breakthrough – before Glasnost, and before the academic Orientalists in Leningrad produced their first academic (and “atheist”) dictionaries of Islam in 1983 and 1988.

Seen from this perspective the Tatar edition of 1978/1981 was the USSR’s first ever “dictionary” of Islam – a remarkable feature given we are speaking about the work of a team operating in Russia’s province, composed in a marginalized language. But perhaps that was part of the success?

The 1993 edition – cleansed and nationalized, and now with a print-run of 100,000 copies – retained the old pocket format and the cheap paper and binding. But by 1993 this format was hardly meant to make this booklet a light-weight companion to the atheist lecturer; rather, the simple outfit helped keep this book
affordable, in a time when the Soviet economy had collapsed, prices and unemployment were skyrocketing, and pensions were low and unreliable. For many years the Islam dictionary of 1993 was sold at every corner in Kazan. Yet it turned out that this booklet was not just the peak but also the end of the popular pocket dictionary format. The next major reference book on Islam that was published in Kazan (in 2004) already appeared as a veritable “encyclopedia”, equipped with a beautiful hard cover and color photographs, and with contributions not only by local historians and philologists but also by professional Arabists from Moscow and St. Petersburg. Tellingly, such later publications all used the Russian language, not Tatar; they did not target a superstitious rural population but spoke to a Tatar urban intelligentsia that was educated via the Russian language, and that, after recovering from the economic precarity of the 1990s, was now able to afford books of higher quality.

While several formal features of the 1993 edition of Islam: Explanatory Dictionary were thus replaced, the booklet's strategy to combine basic information on Islam with entries on national Muslim personalities, institutions, and literary works remained a success. This approach was soon adopted by a multi-volume series on Islam in Russia's individual regions and republics, published initially in Nizhniy Novgorod and then in Moscow; here the initiative came not from an Academy of Sciences but from a private Islamic publishing house affiliated to one of the new post-Soviet muftiates, the Moscow-based Spiritual Administration of Muslims of the Russian Federation. With this affiliation to a mufiate the transition from atheist popular academic dictionaries to religious-academic encyclopedias came to its conclusion. With it came the victory of the Russian language in the genre; while the Islamic publishing sector is still booming in Russia (including encyclopedic works translated from the Turkish language), no new Tatar-language dictionary of Islam has seen the light of the day since 1993.

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