

THE PRESENT SITUATION OF THE SOVIET MUSLIMS: THE EXAMPLE OF KAZAN TATARS

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[Islam arrived in the Volga-Ural region a little over a thousand years ago. The Bulgars of Chan Almas had officially accepted Islam on 16 Muharram 310 (16 May 922). Approximately 70 years before the Russians adopted Christianity as their official religion, Islam had been recognized as the state religion by the then Turkic Bulgar state. The Tatars and Bashkirs, the Muslim people of the Volga-Ural region, were the first to fall under Russian domination 433 years ago [1552 C.E.] and were heavily suppressed by the Orthodox Russians. Mosques were destroyed or converted into Orthodox churches, and the Russian Orthodox church forcibly baptized Muslims. In the year 1756, eighty percent of all mosques in the province (gubirna) of Kazan were destroyed.]

After Catherine II's reforms in 1780, the Muslims began reproducing mainly religious literature and distributing it among the population. During the first year of the Bolshevik revolution (1917), the Soviet government promised the Muslim workers freedom of religion and practice of their manners and customs without restrictions. However, after gaining power, the Soviet government broke all promises - religious leaders were persecuted, religious institutions were closed, religious education was not permitted. This was followed by anti-religious propaganda by the "Union of Militant Atheists." During World War II, the Soviet government revised its policy of persecution against religion and Islam. But after the war in 1953 Chrushevich continued with administrative and psychological attacks under the motto "back to Lenin."

The Muslim population of the Soviet Union is between 45 and 50 million, making it the sixth largest in the world (1980 data). The majority of the Soviet Muslims are of Turkic ethnic origin. They live in the Volga-Ural region, Northern Caucasus, Central Asia and other parts of the Soviet Union. There are approximately 6.5 million Tartar and Bashkir Muslims in the Volga-Ural region. In 1982, only 17 mosques were operating in Tataristan and there is no madrasah in Kazan today.

Anti-Islamic, atheistic propaganda and measures taken by the state, which have lasted more than 70 years, have made the observance of Islam impossible and the number of practicing Muslims has decreased. In the Soviet Union, a religious person is not popular and has minimum chances for a promotion. And to propagate Islam is strictly forbidden while atheistic propaganda is an obligation for all. In one form or other, all public organizations and mass media promote the doctrine of atheism. The Soviet regime preserves the officials of religious capacity purely for propaganda purposes. Of the 28,000 mosques from the Russian Empire period only about 400 mosques remain today.]

The Muslim population of the Soviet Union is between 45 and 50 million, making it the sixth largest in the world after Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Turkey, far ahead of Egypt or Iran. In

the USSR the term "Muslim" is generally used to describe a people who before the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution belonged to the Muslim [Islam] religion and culture. It has, therefore, a national and cultural significance beyond the purely religious one [1].

The majority of the Soviet Muslims are of Turkic ethnic origin. They live in the Volga-Ural region, Northern Caucasus, Central Asia and other parts of the Soviet Union. Nowadays in this region there are approximately 6.5 million [Tatar and Bashkir] Muslims [RSFSR, 2].

Total War Against All Religions

The policies of the Soviet state toward Muslims are characterised by the same lack of uniformity and coherence which were once the mark of tsarist policies. To be sure, the main goal of the new regime has remained unchanged since 1917. The bolshevik leaders launched a "total war" against all religions as soon as they came to power but the policies which they employed to achieve this goal varied, reflecting at all times their tactical flexibility.

Consequently, after the fragile modus vivendi of the first decade of Bolshevik rule, the Muslims had to contend with a very aggressive anti-Islam campaign, a frontal attack on Islam which subsided only with the coming of the war. The modus vivendi of the post-war period has been shaped, among other factors, by the awareness of the Soviet leadership that the "Muslim face" of the Soviet Union could become an asset in its relations with the Islamic revival in the Middle East from "contaminating" its Muslim regions. The intensification of the anti-Islamic campaign in the press in the past four years, and the proliferation of scholarly studies of Islam which focus on Russian Islam reflect in particular some of the efforts of the Soviet leadership aimed at discrediting Islam and underlining its backward nature and antisocial character [3]. Initial measures taken under Chernenko suggest that the anti-Muslim campaign will be pursued with a vengeance.

There is nothing to indicate a fundamental change in the Soviet attitude, either in the near future or at some more distant time. Any such change would be tantamount to coming to terms with a rival ideology whose capacity to mobilize outstrips that of Communism; ultimately, it might lead to abandoning Marxism-Leninism.

In the eyes of the authorities, moreover, Islam as a religion is still what it was 50 years ago, not just an anachronistic legacy of a pre-socialist past, but also and above all a major obstacle to the advent of home sovieticus, the final stage of the biological and cultural symbiosis of Russians and Muslims [4].

Unfortunate as it is, we observe that the Soviet regime preserves the officials of religious capacity purely for propaganda purposes. For example the imam-hatyp of the Moscow mosque, Ahmedjan Mustafin, who had his religious education in a Kazan madrasah, said recently in an interview that there are a hundred mosques, and about a thousand mahalla and village masjids. And all are open for praying [5]. But we know that of the 28,000 mosques from the Russian Empire period today remains only about 400 mosques [6]. A further point, it is a fact that there is no madrasah in Kazan, therefore the above mentioned imam-hatyp could not have had his religious education in Kazan.

The Model Atheist Teacher

Although the Soviet constitution does not forbid being religious, a religious person is not popular and has minimum chances for a promotion. And to propagate Islam is strictly forbidden while atheistic propaganda is an obligation for all.

Atheistic propaganda in the Soviet Union is systematically conducted on a far reaching scale. It is an

essential function, for example, of all educational institutions (from kindergarten to university).

Atheist propaganda already begins in the nursery school. Scientific atheism is an obligatory part of the curriculum of universities in the USSR. Training and retraining teachers in scientific atheism is one of the primary tasks of the atheist propaganda. No effort is spared in trying to create "the model atheist teacher." Seminars on teaching scientific atheism have been incorporated into the system of political training for teachers at secondary schools. For workers, the departments of propaganda and agitation of the Communist Parties in the different republics have developed a special system of atheist indoctrination. The primary Party and Komsomol organizations are obliged to oversee the effectiveness of atheist propaganda among workers. Large enterprises have special Soviets for the purpose of conducting atheist propaganda. Many factories also have atheist schools. As in urban enterprises, primary Party and social organizations in the countryside are obliged to conduct atheist propaganda on Sovkhozes and Kolkhozes, In one form or other, all public organizations and mass media promote the doctrine of atheism.

Professional agitators are not only obliged to wage antireligious propaganda at places of business and learning but are also responsible for going to people's homes to reeducate believers and awaken interest among those who are indifferent towards the religious elements among the population. The authorities try to augment the ranks of professional agitators by recruiting ordinary teachers, students, pupils, blue- and white-collar workers, and Kolkhozniks for such work. Some of these persons are charged with combating vestiges of religion while on the job; others are supposed to take up the cause of fighting religion in their free time. A generally accepted estimate of the number of persons engaged in such activities is six million [7].

Obstacle: Islam

As we see from these examples the Soviet state is trying very hard to annihilate this obstacle: Islam. But with little success. For example according to the April 1984 issue of "Nauka i Religiya" (Science and Religion), the antireligious effort against Islam in Daghestan is running into difficulties among both the young and the old. S. Muslimov, a specialist on antireligious questions, reports that many Daghestani students believe either that religion serves a positive function in society or that it at least is not harmful and need not be combated." [8]

Until quite recently, the Soviet Muslim republics were protected from outside contamination by the iron curtain. Today, under the impact of many different factors, including the Iranian revolution, the war in Afghanistan, Arab fundamentalism, this iron curtain has ceased to be impenetrable, the contacts between Soviet Muslims and their fellow Muslims abroad, which were broken off around 1920, are now becoming more frequent. For the Soviet authorities, the new situation is both positive and dangerous. The resumption of contacts may indeed help them in their penetration and psychological conquest of the Muslim world; but if they were to lose control of these same contacts, then the latter could serve as a "transmission belt" through which subversive ideas could find their way into Muslim republics and help destabilize them [9].

In our time of modern communications the Soviet rulers are challenged by foreign broadcasts, especially those in Turkic languages; namely by VOA (Voice of America) in Uzbek, Azeri, RI (Radio Liberty) in Tatar, Turkmen, Uzbek, Kirghiz, Kazakh, Azeri, Tajik and Saudi Arabia in Uighur, Radio Iran in Azeri and Persian. Therefore such broadcasts are heavily jammed. Besides, more recent Soviet reports tell of finding audio-cassettes with an Islamic message appearing throughout Soviet Central Asia in all kinds of institutions, including officers' clubs. Some contain speeches of Ayatullah Khomeini and other religious figures, recorded from Radio Iran and other religious speeches from

Saudi Arabia [10]. But this positive development from the viewpoint of Islam doesn't imply that there is a new Islamic revival in the USSR.

The Tatars

Every group of Muslims in the Soviet Union has its own characteristics and differences and all need separate and special attention. But for a closer investigation of Soviet Muslims I choose a particular, may be a radical, example: The Tartars and Bashkirs, the Muslim people of the Volga-Ural region. They are an extreme example because they were the first to fall under Russian domination 433 years ago and hence are more suppressed. When we examine their case we observe that a bare majority of these Muslims still uphold their religious belief. Their case, may be, is not a common example for the other Muslim peoples of the Soviet Union, but in any case it provides us with an approximate idea of the actual state of Islam in the USSR.

When in 1552, with the decline of the Chanate [Khanate] of Kazan, the peoples of the Volga-Ural region, particularly the Turkic Tatars and Bashkirs, passed under the Russian yoke and were heavily suppressed by the Orthodox Russians, Islam alone enabled these Turks to keep their national identity. Islam had had a long tradition in the Volga-Ural region. Already approximately 70 years before the Russians adopted Christianity as their official religion, Islam had been recognized as the state religion by the then Turkic Bulgar state." Mufti Talgat Tajeddin, Chairman of the "Muslim Religious Board for the European Part of the USSR and Serbia," confirms that the Bulgars of Chan Almas had officially accepted Islam on 16 Muharram 310 (16 May 922) [12].

Mosques Converted into Churches

In 1552 following the conquest of Chanate [Khanate] of Kazan (1473-1552) the mosques were destroyed or converted into Orthodox churches. The state supported the arbitrary dealings of the Russian Orthodox church which lasted for more than 200 years and, among other things, forced Muslims to be baptized. [similar to [Muslims in Spain](#)] In the year 1756 in the province (gubirna) of Kazan 418 out of the existing 536 mosques were destroyed [13]. Until 1759 Volga Tatars were not permitted to build mosques and madrasahs [14].

Catherine II started a more liberal policy towards her Muslim subjects. "The Religious Administration" was founded in Ufa on December 4, 1780 [15]. Its main duty was to examine and appoint the religious leaders requested by the Muslim congregation. This religious administration in a way functioned as a controlling organ of the state. The Russian Orthodox church, in the meantime, had done missionary work among the native, non-Russian population under the protection of the state. The results, however, did not live up to the expectations; particularly the Tatars rejected these conversion attempts. At the fifth census taken in 1794 103,050 male and 108,290 female Tatars lived in Muslims. This was even acknowledged the province of Kazan, of these only 13,384 men and 13,922 women were baptized [16].

After Catherine II's reforms, printing in Arabic writing had become possible, the Muslims began reproducing mainly religious literature and distributing it among the population. In 1868 already 729 mosques existed in Kazan province and the number rose from year to year [17]. The spiritual work of the mullas had good results. In Nijni-Novgorod, in 1802 the first Tatar Christians openly apostatized from Christianity [18]. The Orthodox church was extremely alarmed at this act and missionaries like the famous Ilminskij (1822-1891) started diverse actions to keep christened Tatars in the church [19].

The Muslims were not discouraged by limited success; on the contrary, new ideas and initiatives were

added. The "Jadid" (renovation) movement, inspired by Ismail Gaspirali (1851-1914), was met with great enthusiasm in the Volga-Ural region. The idea of this movement was to create unity among the Turkic peoples of Russia - unity in language, ideals and action - and reformation of religious schools was begun so that, in addition to religious subjects, worldly subjects were taught as well. Due to the "Jadidism" the Turks of the Volga-Ural region succeeded in using Islam also as a political power.

When the manifesto guaranteeing religious freedom became effective on November 17, 1905, the Turkic peoples were permitted to practise their religion and profess Islam, masses of those who had converted left the church. In the eparchy of Kazan alone 23,860 of the native population turned their backs on the church and converted to Islam [20]. At the same time, the first political endeavors were made. On April 8, 1905, the Muslim intellectuals of the various parts of the country gathered for the first time in Nijni-Novgorod [21]. According to official statements the religious administration in 1907 cared for 6 thousand mahalle in which 5 million Muslims were included [22].

Islam as a Political Movement

During the first year of the Bolshevik revolution, the Soviet communists were forced to consider Islam not only as a religion but also as a politically potent movement representing millions of Muslims. This was even acknowledged in the newly adopted policy by Moscow and announced in the famous declaration of December 20, 1917, addressing the Muslim workers. The Soviet government then promised the Muslim workers freedom of religion and practice of their manners and customs without restrictions [23]. [The December 4, 1917 declaration jointly signed by Lenin and Stalin said: "To the Muslims in Russia, be they Tartars of Volga, the inhabitants of Crimea, the Kaukaz of Siberia or Turkistan, the Turks of Kaukaz, the Charks, the dwellers of Kaukaz mountains, to all those whose mosques and worship places and whose faith and traditions were trampled upon by the Tsars of Russia or the other tyrants; Be assured that your traditions and faith and your national and cultural institutions shall be free from this day and nobody will object to these in future. You are free to organize your national life without any interference and obstacles from outside." The declaration of Nov. 15, 1917, jointly signed by Lenin and Stalin said: "Nations in Soviet Russia are entitled to decide about their future any time. They have the right to secede from the Union and pronounce complete freedom, and also have the right to forsake all national and religious bindings and discrimination." (Communist government Gazette, November 1917)]. After having come to power, the Soviet government, however, broke all these promises: religious leaders were persecuted, religious institutions were closed, religious education was not permitted and churches and mosques still "working" were highly taxed. As these administrative measures did not prove sufficient for the Soviet leaders, they started organizing anti-religious propaganda, in which the "Union of Militant Atheists" played an important role.

To boost the morale of the Soviet peoples during World War II, the Soviet government revised its policy of persecution against religion and Islam. The Soviet government managed to take advantage of this new political situation [24]. The mufti of Ufa, Abdurrahman Resuleve, one of the few survivors of the religious persecutions from 1932-1938, proposed normalization of relations between the Soviet government and Islam to Stalin in 1942. Stalin accepted Resuleve's proposal, a treaty was concluded as a result of which an end was put to antireligious propaganda, at least, for the most part. After 34 years Islam regained its "legal" status and Ufa became the seat of the Islamic administration [25]. But after the war in 1953 Chrushevov continued with administrative and psychological attacks under the motto "back to Lenin." The number of "working" mosques in the entire Soviet Union was reduced to approximately 400 and that of "registered" religious leaders to 2,000 [26]. According to later information in the year 1982 there are 17 mosques in Tataristan [27].

In actuality, the religious administration in Ufa does not possess any religious authority. For instance, in Ufa only a calendar in Arabic, which can be read only by a generation older than 60 years, is being printed. This religious administration in Ufa, which is responsible for the European part of the USSR and Siberia, is not permitted to print further publications and educate religious leaders. In the Soviet Union children in general do not receive a religious education. Also the ulema are not allowed to do any work outside of the mosque, such as in the field of welfare, maintenance of hospitals and religious institutions or in lectures or publications [28].

One of the four religious administrations. "The Muslim Religious Board for Central Asia and Kazakhstan," has the privilege to educate religious leaders and to publish. The Uzbeks and their capital Tashkent are being used by the Soviet Union with the same aim in mind as were the Tatars by Tsarist Russia for their expansionist aims. Since 1965, the four Muslim religious administrations have been controlled more severely and directed more tightly by Moscow. By decree of the USSR Council of Ministers of December 8, 1965, the "Council for Religious Affairs" was created. Officially, this council has the duty to coordinate the relations with the Muslims outside the USSR. Further, this council and its representatives in the republics and administrative regions (kray, rayon) is responsible for the cooperation with the local councils [29].

Anti-Islamic Measures

Anti-Islamic, atheistic propaganda and measures taken by the state, which have lasted more than 70 years, have made the observance and expansion of Islam impossible and the number of believers, or more correctly, of practising Muslims has decreased. That does not necessarily mean, however, that Islam has entirely disappeared in Tataristan and Bashkiria. Since the measures applied so far did not bring the results hoped for, the Soviet leadership during the last years decided to carry out atheistic, and particularly anti-Islamic propaganda on an intellectual basis.

As a consequence, in Kazan alone more than 25 anti-Islamic works were published between 1960 and 1981 [30]. In this way, the authors of these works and various articles were given the opportunity, without being criticized, to insult and abuse Islam and the believers and to create insecurity among the latter. Garif Gobej, a Tatar atheist, writes in the third edition of his book "The Mysteries of the Qur'an," among other things: "There are 225 contradictions in the Quran, 225 contradictions in the book of [Allah](#), who created the world out of nothing! Now look at unbelieving Lenin. He could not even create a fly. In his work consisting of 55 volumes there is not one single contradiction. This even the religious leaders of today cannot deny [31]. Arguments of this kind are easily made since it is known that the contrary in written or oral form cannot be maintained under a totalitarian regime. The Soviet Muslims have no opportunity either to repel these arguments or to let their interpretation of these reproaches be known.

Religious rituals as, for instance, circumcision, deeply rooted in the people as a national custom, is declared unhealthy and unhygienic [32]. Fasting is questioned. In 1961, Mufti Shakirjan Chayaledin was forced to publish a fatwa in which he declared that those working, including the Kolhoz workers, did not have to fast. His fatwa, however, did not meet the approval of the mullas and was not further circulated [33].

When in 1917, the city of Kazan counted only 206 thousand inhabitants, of whom only 22% were Muslim, the city could boast of 13 mosques [34]. Today Kazan has a million inhabitants; half of them are Tatars, This number of Tatars - certainly a great part of them are Muslim - has only one mosque at their disposal. According to Imam Zeki Safiullin more than two thousand believers attend the Friday prayers in the Merjani Mosque, which was constructed more than 200 years ago [35]. Only six young

men from Kazan are permitted to study in Bukhara and yearly soley two Muslims from the Volga-Ural region are allowed to make pilgrimage to Makka [[Hajj](#)] [36].

Three Categories of Muslims

Scarce sociological research results and statistics show that the atheistic policy of almost 70 years has brought positive results for the Soviet leadership and negative ones for the Muslims. In Tataristan the percentage of those who consider themselves believers is, according to official figures, not very high. A sociological study performed by the Atheistic Institute in Penza Oblast shows that among the Russians 28.4% are believers, among the Tatars, who are believing Muslims, the percentage is 31.5%; in Gorkov Oblast the percentage of believing Muslims is 61 among the Tatar women and 40 among the men [37]. Belief in Islam is stronger among the rural population and older people than the urban population. 73.9% of the retirees in the Bashkir ASSR questioned stated that they observed the Islamic tradition [38]. In 1965, in various Tatar villages, 40-50% of the parents named their children according to Muslim tradition and had their sons circumcised, 55-60% had a mulla perform the marriage ceremony and 90% had their dead buried according to religious ritual [39].

The believing Muslims of the Volga-Ural region can be divided into three categories. The first one consists of strictly believing Muslims; they attempt to observe closely Islamic commandments and bans; their number, however, is small. The second category includes mostly elderly people who had had a religious education and for this reason carry on Islamic tradition; their number is also not high. The third category - in it a multitude of intellectuals can be found - is by far the biggest. They are not particularly religious, most of them attend mosques only on high religious holidays, yet they deem it correct to preserve Islamic manners and customs as part of their national and cultural heritage [40].

Islam as a National Identity

As a summary and conclusion, the following is to be said about Islam among the Soviet Muslims: Islam was and has remained a part of the national identity. If today the national, non-religious consciousness is even stronger, this fact is nevertheless due to Islam. The Volga-Ural Muslims have succeeded in keeping their religion through a period of missionary work and reprisals by the state lasting longer than 200 years. Religious freedom subsequently declared by the state gave them the opportunity to expand their religious institutions extensively.

The following Soviet rule having lasted almost 70 years again made it extremely difficult for the Soviet Muslims to practise their religion; the Soviets even succeeded in reducing the number of believing Muslims considerably, but they could not exterminate the influence of Islam as an important part of their national identity. Were the Soviet Muslims given the opportunity to practise their religion without pressure from the state, as in 1905, certainly the number of Muslim believers would rise in the USSR.

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Total population (in Thousand)	In RSFSR		
	1970	1979	1979
Tatars	5931	6317	5011
Bashkirs	1240	7688	1291

Total 7171 7688 6302

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Allah: Allah is the proper name in Arabic for The One and Only God, The Creator and Sustainer of the universe. It is used by the Arab Christians and Jews for the God (Eloh-im in Hebrew; 'Allaha' in Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jesus, pbuh). The word **Allah** does not have a plural or gender. Allah does not have any associate or partner, and He does not

beget nor was He begotten. SWT is an abbreviation of Arabic words that mean 'Glory Be To Him.'

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