Some Side Effects of a Progressive Orientology: Academic Visions of Islam in the Soviet South after Stalin

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It was as early as 1980, in the wake of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and of the occupation of Afghanistan by the Soviet Army in December of the same year, that Edward Said was translated into Russian for the first time—even if the translation was exclusively available for official use, only those trusted by the Soviet state and the Communist party having access to it. During that period the Soviet authorities were wondering what ideologically correct interpretation to give to the Iranian revolution labelled ‘Islamic’ by the Western experts and to the structuring of an Afghan resistance movement led from its beginning in the name of jihad.¹

Though urgent for Moscow, the situation was not entirely new. Already in the 1920s, the nascent USSR had had a pressing need for expertise on its own Muslim world, as well as on the regions of the world of Islam identified as possible fronts for the projection of Bolshevik power. Paradoxically, it was in the ‘bourgeois’ literature on the Orient produced in the West that the young Soviet Union searched for answers, as well as in the sacred texts of Islam. Earlier the Russian Empire, inspired by Great Britain in India, was already notable for its vision of Islam as a vector of social conservatism.² Based on Tsarist practices, early Soviet academics had applied themselves to both Muslim sources and European scholarship to formulate ideas about the formation of political forms of Islam like those Russia was faced with in its own territory, as well as in the Caucasus and Central Asia. A new Marxist school of Oriental studies was entrusted with the task of adjusting these ideas, eventually, after the cultural revolution


² About the oscillation of Russia’s policy in colonial Turkestan between ‘neglect’ (ignorirovanie) and ‘civilising’ (proveshchenie) of vernacular Muslim populations, see notably Daniel Brower, Turkestan and the Fate of the Russian Empire (London—New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 90–113; Robert D. Crews, "An Empire for the Faithful, a Colony for the Dispossessed", Cahiers d’Asie Centrale 17–18 (2009), pp. 79–106.
of 1927–1928, constructing its own discourse on the basis of normative readings of the Qur’an and a reinterpretation of Western Orientalism.

After Stalin’s collectivisation, this ‘Red Orientalism’ became dominant. It strongly narrowed the initial diversity of the Soviet discourse on Islam, equating it with ‘feudalism’. It achieved hegemony in the 1930s through the ‘purges’ to which scholars were invited to contribute by denouncement and exposure. Its dominance would effectively be maintained until the end of the Soviet period, due to tougher lines taken in the late 1950s and in the late 1960s. De-Stalinisation, however, permitted the growing diffusion of works by more classical figureheads of early Soviet Oriental studies, like the Arabic scholar Ignatii Iu. Krachkovskii (1883–1951) and the specialist of Persian studies, Evgenii E. Bertel’s (1890–1957). The latter’s role in the establishment of new research and teaching institutions, and his promotion of national legacies and identities for the Central Asian republics of the USSR constantly re-enforced his position.

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