
Robert Crews explains “how Russia became a Muslim power—and how the government made Islam a pillar of imperial society, transforming Muslims into active participants in the daily operation of the autocracy and the local construction and maintenance of the empire” (p. 3). This book makes a powerful argument which runs counter to the still widespread assumption that Russia, embroiled in so many conflicts with the Ottoman Empire and Iran, regarded itself as the natural enemy of Islam, and that this was also reflected in Russia’s policy towards her “own” Muslims. What Crews is telling us is that the Tsar, who of course regarded himself as the patron of Orthodoxy in the first place, also tried to make use of Islam to control and discipline the Muslim populations of the empire. This was mainly achieved by the creation of a Muslim Muftiate (Crews chooses to translate *Dukhovnoe Sobranie* as “Ecclesiastical Assembly”) in 1788, a kind of Islamic “church” with a fixed hierarchy subordinate to the gubernia administration and the central government. Islamic scholars and mullahs needed a license from this institution, and thus had themselves transformed into an Islamic “clergy”. Licensed mullahs, as well as all kinds of lay people, filed huge amounts of complaints and petitions not only to the Muftiate, but also to the Russian administration on all levels. The possibility for Muslim litigants to appeal to a Russian court, to the governor-general, and even to the Tsar himself blurred the boundaries between “customary”/ Islamic law and state law (p. 151).

The first three chapters (“A Church for Islam”, “The State in the Mosque”, and “An Imperial Family”, pp. 31-191) discuss the creation of that Ecclesiastical Assembly in Ufa and the relationship between the new “clergy” and the Russian administration in the Volga-Urals. Crews describes this relationship as an interdependency: “religion came to depend on the institutions of the state, just as the empire rested upon confessional foundations” (p. 10). The author provides ample information on the deliberations of Tsarist administrators and ministers on how to deal with Islam. The most precious parts of the book, however, deal with “everyday controversies” within the Muslim communities into which the administration was drawn. Using accounts, petitions, complaints, and other materials from archives in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Orenburg, Kazan, Ufa, and Tashkent, the author discusses issues where “shari’a” seemed to clash with imperial law (e.g. with regard to burial procedures, pp. 67-71), or where Muslims disagreed over religious norms and practices among themselves. These case studies include individual lawsuits on marriage, divorce, and inheritance, but also struggles over the appointment of mullahs or conflicts occurring when part of a village population split from the community and founded a new mosque. Other cases deal with disputes over land use and the revenues from *waqf* endowments and Sufi shrines. There is ample evidence of mullahs denouncing each other and trying to draw the tsarist authorities on their side. Crews makes clear how fragile the position of the mullah was, not only with respect to the authorities and the Muftiate, who had the power to remove him from office or punish him, but also with regard to the Muslim “laypeople” who could send complaints and accusations to the authorities. The Islamic “clergymen” obtained no state salary and were therefore completely dependent on the charity of their communities, which were often dominated by powerful notables who pursued their own agendas. It is therefore no wonder that mullahs and muftis repeatedly petitioned the authorities for an official recognition of their status of Muslim clergy as a special “estate”, with appropriate immunities and privileges.

© Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, 2007

Also available online – www.brill.nl
In addition to the cases mentioned above, Crews pays particular attention to moral issues, including accusations of impiety and adultery, complaints about the use of alcohol and hidden or open prostitution (cf. also pp. 283f, pp. 329f). Crews comes to the conclusion that both the administration and the Islamic “clergy” found a common language on “sin”, and depicted the state law as well as the shari’a as the guarantor of chastity and morality. The tsarist police assumed “that Islamic law would guarantee domestic order and harmony among Muslims, much as canon law regulated the Christian family” (p. 145). Crews’ case studies on marriage and divorce are of special interest because they offer ample material on the situation of women in their respective Muslim communities. According to the author, “Russian authorities backed rights for women in Muslim marriages, but in so doing they claimed to be following the textual tradition of Islam itself, not ‘liberating’ women from it” (p. 147). The resolution of these cases rested much on negotiation and personal discretion of the mullahs and the administrators involved, and often worked to the benefit of women. However, Crews detects a general turn towards “anticlericalism” among Russian officials around 1850, when tsarist officials began to rely less on mullahs and muftis as experts and intermediaries and more on the advice of non-Muslim specialists. A prominent example is the Orientalist Professor Alexander Kazem-Bek of St. Petersburg University, a convert to Christianity. Crews shows how this scholar tended to put the classical legal tradition of Hanafi lawbooks (some of which he had edited himself) higher than deliberations of mullahs and Muslim litigants. This is, of course, a wonderful example of “Orientalism”: philologists regard themselves as the true specialists of Islamic tradition, and they have their interpretations enforced by the colonial state. In several cases discussed by the author, Kazem-Bek’s “advice to the government” worked to the detriment of Muslim women involved in the respective law suits, but it remains unclear whether this was a general tendency.

While these cases dealt with Muslim communities in the European part of Russia, Crews’s book is also welcome for its comparative excursions into Central Asia. Chapter 4 (“Nomads into Muslims”, pp. 192-240) deals with the Russian religious policy in the Steppe region. While the Kazakhs were kept outside of the purview of the Orenburg Ecclasiastical Assembly, the administration initially supported activities of Tatar mullahs in the steppe, believing that an Islamic influence would lead the nomads towards “civilization”. On Russian incentive and with Tatar support, the khans of the Inner Horde began to build mosques and Islamic schools. In the second half of the 19th century, however, the Russians decided to curb the Islamic influence among the Kazakhs by limiting the number of mullahs and by the “administrative” closing of mosques. Crews expounds the arguments of the Kazakh bureaucrat and ethnographer Chokan Valikhanov against the support of Islamic law among the nomads; Valikhanov believed that the Kazakhs had never been “real” Muslims, and he opted for a return to customary law as administered by the Kazakh elders. This reflected a growing conviction among officials that Catherine’s policy had been a mistake, and that instead of promoting Islam in the steppe one should have done more to convert the Kazakhs to Christianity, and to Russify them. The Islamization process continued, however, and Kazakh mullahs repeatedly—but in vain—petitioned the opening of their own Ecclasiastical Administration. According to Crews, it was in the Steppe regions where the Russian state remained weakest, because here the administration was least entangled with the affairs of Islam, and Muslims could not utilize its power on behalf of religion (p. 20).

Crews moves on to Turkestan in chapter 5 (pp. 241-292). After the conquest of that region in the 1860s and 70s, the Russian administration’s official policy was “to ignore Islam” in Transoxiana. Consequently, the tsarist engagement with Islamic institutions in Central Asia was less systematic than elsewhere. Again, the documentation shows that laypeople and