



Stalin in Mecca

Robert D. Crews analyzes Tsarist Russia and Islam. And a story about Soviet Muslims as “consensual imperial subjects”

Although the Russian and Islamic empires were heirs to a common Byzantine heritage, they experienced about a half-millennium of bellicose relations while the **Russians** expanded steadily into Central Asian lands. Splendidly, “this book shows 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.”

Picture [Wiki](#)



Istanbul's German Embassy and Consulate guided the concerted German-**Ottoman** jihad effort from 1914 to 1918: The Soviets followed suit and proclaimed their own red-green jihad for the “Oppressed People against the Colonialists” since 1917, and again in 1920 in Baku, until World War Two.

Thereafter, Bolsheviks cast an atheistical shadow over all that mattered to the faithful. The goal of the Kremlin “infidels” was to create a Eurasian brand of Islam and a “Homo islamicus.”

Bolsheviks aspired to “world revolution” and called Muslims to jihad against the rulers of rival empires. But in 1941, Hitler turned Muslim prisoners of war around to jihad against their “Soviet masters.” After the Germans’ defeat, a few of those anti-Soviet Muslims from Central Asia remained in Germany and settled down in Munich.

With the Cold War in full swing, Western clandestine services recruited among the remaining too. After Stalin’s death, some were dispatched undercover as pilgrims to Mecca so that they could discuss Khrushchev and de-Stalinization with pilgrims from Soviet Central Asia—Tatars, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Turkmenians, Tadjiks, and Uzbeks—, and citizens of other “-stan” lands.

The aim of Western intelligence services was to explore Muslim potential for opposition to the Soviet colonization of their lands. But the leader of Soviet pilgrims, Imam Mirza G. Salikhov, readily found passages in the Qur’an that could be interpreted in the Kremlin’s favor. The Imam drew his salary from Moscow, though in the past he had spent two years in the GULag. He knew of Khrushchev’s reforms, but not of his secret anti-Stalin speech. So here comes a story on the micro level of relations that illuminates the situation.

A story about some Soviet Muslims as "consensual imperial subjects"

This is a 1956 talk with Imam Salikhov of Soviet pilgrims in Mecca. A former Soviet Muslim who was sent from Munich to Mecca asked the questions. The German Islam policy used spies as pilgrims there, and pan-Islamic slogans of World War One. In Baku of 1920, the Soviets picked up related [lines](#) to incite from there a "world revolution" at the "Congress of the Peoples of the East," and instigated a red-green jihad against foreign overlords in the colonies and dependent areas. On 13 August 1956, Radio Tashkent broadcasted in Uzbek that some Soviet pilgrims perform the Hajj in Mecca. The group, led by Muscovite Imam Mirza Gumaretdin Salikhov, also spent days in Cairo to visit the al-Azhar University. Here are twelve questions and answers from Imam Salikhov's talk in Mecca, 21 July 1956, showing a deplorable situation [Source: Private Papers; Bavarian State Archive, Munich]:

1. "You say that there is liberty of conscience and religion now. Tell me how many mosques are open now in Kazan, in Ufa and in other cities and villages of the Tatar-Bashkir S.S.R.? There were 17 mosques in Kazan and 11 mosques in Ufa before."

Imam: "By official permission of the government, one cathedral mosque is open in Kazan and one in Ufa. Many people come on Friday to the mosque for the 'Namaz'. They cannot find sufficient space in the Kazan mosque. Therefore people perform their 'Namaz' in 300 private apartments throughout the city."

2. "Is there a school attached to every Clerical Moslem Administration for preparing Moslem priests, for example, in Ufa?"

Imam: "There is one school for all the Moslems of the USSR in Bukhara. We are now negotiating for the opening of another school in Ufa."

3. "You departed for Mecca on July 10, and on July 9, articles against the Islamic religion appeared in the Soviet newspapers. Have you your own press organ at the Clerical Administration in which you may defend our religion against all kinds of slander from the communists?"

Imam: "We have no press organ, but we are also negotiating on this subject. One cannot act against science and all the things written in our Soviet newspapers are based on science, my son." Here he, himself, smiled ironically.

4. "If there exists any religious freedom, why then is religion not taught at Soviet schools?"

Imam: "In our country the church is separated from the state. Schools belong to the state."

5. "Why don't you open your own schools where the children could have lessons of religion several times a week?"

Imam: "The laws of the state object to this. These laws were accepted by organs of the people's power. You are a lawyer yourself, you ought to know about that." Here I stressed that the Criminal Code prohibits the teaching of religion, and that this law was not passed by the people, but by an atheistic party. The Imam did not say anything more, he only smiled.

6. "May you print the Koran according to your own wish?"

Imam: "Yes, this year 3,500 copies of it were printed in Tashkent."

7. "Isn't this too little for over 30,000,000 Moslems?"

Imam: "Whoever is interested in this can find it. In my Moscow mosque all the shelves are packed with Koran copies."

At this I remarked: "Well, then probably all the 3,500 Koran books published in Tashkent, must be in your mosque." The Imam smiled again.

8. "In what language is the Koran published?"

Imam: "In Arabian."

9. "What ~~languages~~ ^{alphabet} are the children taught in school?"

Imam: "Russian."

10. "Then the new generation is unable to read the prayers printed in Arabian type?"

Imam: "Many children learn the prayers in their family, at home."

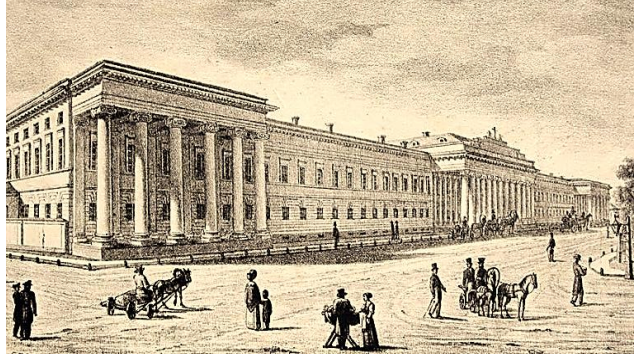
11. "But parents who belong to the young generation do not know the Arabian alphabet!"

Imam: "Persons who are about 36 or 38 and above generally know the Arabian alphabet. Besides, who believes in God will find a way..."

12. "Before the revolution, our Moslem, Tatar and Caucasian women never married Russians or Ukrainians. Even until World War II such cases were very rare. What is the situation now? I am interested in this sociological question under Communist conditions."

Imam: "We have freedom of opinion. Every one acts as he likes. In my 'hutba' (sermon) which I read to the people who come to our 'Namaz' in my mosque, I always say: 'Keep your morals and customs.' Is this not freedom?"

Kazan University, also a Center of Oriental Studies since 1807, Pic. [Wiki](#)



Nevertheless, according to a Western intelligence source, Salikhov “smoothly combined Islamic and communist ways of life;” and most of the men in his group (who rejected proffered gifts as well) also spoke favorably of their life in the U.S.S.R.—perhaps there was some progress in certain areas relative to the previous Tsarist Russian era.

Only one among them disclosed that, to encourage his prompt return, the Soviets had compelled him to leave his family at home. Keeping families hostage while their men travelled abroad, was widely spread under the Soviet praxis.

In Mecca, these Soviet Muslims acted as “consensual imperial subjects” even when, in Moscow, the compelling anti-Stalin disclosures were being made. Travelling abroad, the Soviet Muslims in Mecca spoke of “our government” and rejected “counterrevolutionary lies.”

On the other hand, the pilgrims still lived under the dangerous red regime that was willing to use all means, including force, against those with other opinions or with a strong faith.

Most interestingly, Imam Salikhov pointed at about “300 private apartments” of Kazan that served for Friday prayers because there were neither enough mosques in order nor enough space in the [obviously only one operating] Mosque of Kazan [The city celebrated its 2005 millennium with the inauguration of the Qul Sharif Mosque, مسجد قول شريف, that was destroyed in the 1552 Russian invasion, named after Qul Sharif, a known Tatar language-poet, scholar and imam of the Khanate of Kazan, and rebuilt in the Republic of Tatarstan since 1996].

As it became known, there were almost two decades after the break down of the Soviet empire and its Communism, some Muslims in the Russian Federation or nearby in newly independent countries who would like to return to the “sunny Soviet days” before the onset of “today’s chaos.”

No doubt, the Soviet decline and regime changes put additional burdens on them and their families, though in many cases allowed for a more self-determined development.

As this talk example shows, those days were not so sunny after all. However, a question worth asking in the comparative history of America-Mideast-Europe is why the Soviets were so much more “skillful” in their dealings with many Muslims than either their post-communist successors or their Western rivals have been.

[Wolfgang G. Schwanitz](#)

Robert D. Crews: *For Prophet and Tsar. Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2006, 463 pp.

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