Islamic Media in Soviet Central Asia

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Abstract

This paper takes stock of "Islamic media" in the USSR by reviewing the kinds of sources that are available for the study of Islam in the Soviet Union, and, more importantly, exploring how social historians can use them. What follows is a detailed discussion of three genres of materials: anti-religious propaganda; correspondence of the official organizations engaged with Islam; and what, for convenience's sake, I will term Islamic *samizdat* (popular religious literature and the few available autobiographies of '*ulama*).

Keywords

Islam – media – Soviet Union – communism – samizdat – risola – sadum – Central Asia

The problem I want to tackle in this paper is methodological: how to use avail- able historical sources to reconstruct religious and social life in communist Central Asia. The totalizing narrative of atheist modernization and the anti-religious policies promoted by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) pose unique methodological challenges to any student of Soviet-era Islam. In the 1920s and 1930s, Islamic figures and institutions experienced an assault without parallel in the history of the modern Islamic world. Members of the *'ulama* were rounded up *en masse,* while virtually all *madrasas* and *maktabs* were closed.[1] For the remainder of the Soviet period, all Islamic education taking place outside of the three officially sanctioned *madrasas* run by the

1 S. Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam, 1917–1941* (Westport, CT.: Praeger, 2001).

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Central Asian muftiate (sadum) was relegated to an underground existence.2 The production of Islamic texts in manuscript form, including saintly hagiographies, all but came to a standstill, in significant part because so many *'ulama* died in the Great Terror of 1937–1938.3 Indeed, beyond the limited confines of the four muftiates, any public manifestation of Islamic practice or thought was formally proscribed.

Much of the past scholarship on Islam in the Soviet Union has taken this gloomy and restrictive panorama at face value, and as a point of departure. While acknowledging that Islam neither died nor withered away after the end of mass repression, this scholarship has relied almost exclusively on Soviet propaganda and scientific atheistic literature to draw conclusions about Islamic practices, figures, and institutions in the 53 years of communist rule following the Terror.4 This can, in part, be attributed to the limited availability of sources during the Cold War. But the real problem arises from a fundamental and flawed assumption: that Islam was consigned to an isolated and even clandestine existence, devoid of any meaningful interaction with Soviet institutions and the social transformations wrought by communism.

This paper takes stock of "Islamic media" in the USSR by reviewing the kinds of sources that are available for the study of Islam in the Soviet Union, and, more importantly, exploring how social historians can use them. What follows is a detailed discussion of three genres of materials: anti-religious propaganda; correspondence of the official organizations engaged with Islam; and what, for convenience's sake, I will term Islamic *samizdat* (popular religious literature and the few available autobiographies of *'ulama*). I do not deal with the fourth category of anti-religious material, scientific atheistic scholarship, whose relevance to the study of Islam has been discussed by DeWeese.5 The paper demonstrates that "Islamic media," here defined as textual spaces in which Islam was discussed, debated, and reproduced in evolving forms, were as alive and well in the USSR as anywhere else, and that these sources—however biased,

2 E. Tasar, "The Official Madrasas of Soviet Uzbekistan," *Journal of the Social and Economic History of the Orient,* 59, no. 1–2 (2016): 265–302.

3 R. Shamsutdinov (ed.), *Repressiia, 1937–1938 gody: dokumenty i materialy* (Tashkent: Sharq, 2005).

4 The most recent and most exhaustively researched work taking this stance is Y. Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From World War II to Perestroika* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). For a more general critique of "Sovietological" literature on Islam, see D. DeWeese, "Is- lam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's *Islam in the Soviet Union,*" *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 7, no.2 (1996): 180–207.

5 D. DeWeese, "Shamanization in Central Asia," *Journal of the Social and Economic History of the Orient,* 57, no. 3 (2014): 326–363.

and however extreme the constraints under which they were produced—offer a legitimate foundation for making analytical claims about Islam in the Soviet period. Expanding the definition of Islamic media to include a wide variety of sources, some of them written by Central Asians hostile to religion, offers one way to nuance or soften what may be termed the "epistemology of rupture" that (justifiably) influences any study of Islam after the Great Terror, and to dispense with "simple dichotomies, such as 'Muslim' vs. 'Western', 'traditional' vs. 'modern', or 'religious vs. scientific' that are mostly unhelpful in understanding actual historical development, or in understanding actual contemporary life."6

The topic of Islamic media's role in the atheist Soviet Union, and the ques- tion of which media count as Islamic, also raises important questions about the nature of religion and secularism in the region after World War II. It is conventional to think of the USSR as a militantly secular society. But from the mid- 1940s onward, religion's status as a "hostile" ideology was nebulous: a perhaps unique aspect of Islam's position in Soviet Central Asia after the war is that the state continued its assault on religion rhetorically while largely forfeiting the struggle in practice. Religion was an enduring, and tacitly acknowledged, presence in all aspects of Soviet life (including in the district and provincial levels of the Party), especially in Central Asia.

In having parted with militant secularism and facilitated the emergence of (or created) tacitly acknowledged social spaces for the open practice of religion, Soviet Central Asia shared certain characteristics with the constellation of "postsecular" behaviors and assumptions Jürgen Habermas articulated to understand religion's role in the Western Europe of the 2000s. One such assumption that seems particularly apt in the Soviet case, due to its long Tsarist-era history,7 is tolerance, "a shared basis of mutual recognition from which repugnant dissonances can be overcome." Tolerance constitutes a "recognition [that] should not be confused with an appreciation of an alien culture and way of living, or of rejected convictions and practices." It "means that believers of one faith, of a different faith and non-believers must mutually concede one another the right to those convictions, practices and ways of living that they themselves reject."8 When removed from the contemporary European context

6 D. DeWeese, "Muslim Medical Culture in Modern Central Asia: A Brief Note on Manuscript Sources from the Sixteenth to Twentieth Centuries," *Central Asian Survey,* 32, no. 1 (2013): 4.

7 On tolerance as a core principle of Tsarist "confessional politics," and its utility to non-Christians, see P. Werth, *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths: Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia* (London: Oxford University Press, 2014), 117–121.

8 J. Habermas, "Notes on Post-Secular Society," *New Perspectives Quarterly,* 25 (2008): 23.

of competing liberal claims of "radical multiculturalism and militant secularism," Habermas' call to blur the lines between the religious and the secular by placing the two in the prism of a "complementary learning process" adds significant nuance to the paradox of Central Asia under atheism, a society that was at once religious and secular. My reading of the sources discussed below is that atheists and religious people in the region "practiced tolerance" by accepting each other's place and role in society without necessarily accepting religion or atheism, respectively.

The advantages of applying the idea of postsecularism to a context that appears to be, on paper, highly religious or highly secular (depending on one's perspective), are apparent in Massimo Rosati's analysis of Kemalist Turkey. Postsecularism is "an appropriate label for indicating new forms of life that take shape as a consequence of interpenetration between secular and religious worldviews and related practices."9 Rosati devotes significant attention to those "postsecular transformative practices [that] can negotiate new relationships between genders and roles, new understandings of public and private, codes of decency, and so on."10 Taken as a whole, Rosati's work represents a challenge to the stark dichotomies presented by secularization theories that view the religious and the secular as incompatible or mutually antagonistic spheres. He demonstrates the points of overlap between religious and secular nationalism and their ability to coalesce around an established authoritarian political culture. Rosati's approach could be applied not only to political his- tory, but also to social history.

The sources discussed below portray the ambiguity of a society that had renounced, but not entirely abandoned, anti-religious activism and significantly loosened once-rigid boundaries between the sacred and the secular. The notion of postsecularism as (in James Beckford's paraphrasing of Haber- mas) "primarily a matter of legal, ethical, and political adjustments to the persistence—or reentry—of religious forces in the public sphere"11 can be applied to Soviet Central Asia, with the obvious caveats that religious freedom did not exist in the USSR and that religious ideas, practices, and institutions circulated in a sphere whose presence was only tacitly guaranteed by the state. In this connection, the dissolution of the secular-religious binary implied by

9 M. Rosati, *The Making of a Postsecular Society: A Durkheimian Approach to Memory, Pluralism and Religion in Turkey* (London: Routledge, 2016), 7.

10 Ibid., 43.

11 J.A. Beckford, "Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 51 (2012): 1–19. Beckford's critique of Habermas, and postsecularism itself, is beyond the scope of the present discussion.

Rosati's postsecular perspective on Turkey affords significant insight into the dynamics of religious life under communism. The untenability of this binary is apparent in the sources discussed below: anti-religious propaganda ends up confirming religion's widespread popularity, while covertly written Islamic texts seem indifferent or oblivious to the existence of communism. These sources, I argue, operated in much the same way as Muslims and communists went about their lives in the post-World War II USSR: in a tacit, never openly acknowledged pattern of coexistence and cross-fertilization between the secular and Islamic realms that one can readily discern in the region's religious dis- course and institutions today.

Anti-Religious Propaganda

The idea that anti-religious propaganda—about as biased a source as one could ask for—might provide insights into the practice of Islam may seem counterintuitive. Yet this is particularly the case for the many decades of the Soviet period preceding the explosion in ethnographic studies of Islam that began after the establishment of the Institute of Scientific Atheism in 1964.12 We lack a critical mass of eyewitness accounts, let alone scholarly studies, describing or analyzing Muslim practices. This is no minor concern: for example, the existing scholarship has nothing to say about whether, and how, practices at shrines changed in response to restrictive policies on religion. The descriptions of such practices contained in Soviet propaganda literature offer one of the few avenues for building an empirical portrait of Islam.

It needs to be clarified that by "anti-religious propaganda" I mean two very different bodies of literature. First, there were explanatory tracts and lectures attempting (in apparent sincerity) to convince believers of the foolhardiness of their adherence to religion. The main agency producing such materials was the Society for the Transmission of Scientific and Political Knowledge (known simply as *Znanie,* "Knowledge"), established in 1947. Its primary output was a series of lecture cycles delivered at collective farms across the USSR.13 Second, there were publications that "preached to the choir" by outrageously insulting

12 S. Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 120–121.

13 On *Znanie,* see P. Walters, "A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy," in S.P. Ramet, *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 18.

and ridiculing clergy members and other religious figures.14 These appeared in local atheistic publications such as *Bloknot Agitatora,* a "sociopolitical" journal produced by district Party committees throughout the USSR, and, with time, the flagship atheistic—and ostensibly more academic—journal *Nauka i Religiia* (Science and Religion).15 Additionally, local press featured both categories of material.

The first category's potential utility emerges from the transcript of an atheistic lecture delivered at collective farms across Kyrgyzstan's most mountainous province, Tian Shan (today Naryn), in the mid-1940s. The lecture, prepared by a Kyrgyz agitator named Kuranov and entitled "On Feudal-*Bai* Vestiges and the Goals of Struggling with Them," describes Islam exclusively in terms of violations of socialist discipline.16 For Kuranov, anything that harms the social and economic life of the collective farm is, by definition, Islamic. From a rambling narrative that must have taken more than an hour to deliver orally, five points can be deduced. First, that a feudal mentality among the Kyrgyz, as evinced by behavior as diverse as hospitality, poor pediatric hygiene, eschewal of forks and spoons, and consumption of *kumys*, is responsible for low output in collective farms. Second, that underage marriage facilitated by *mullas* is common. Third, that these *mullas* publicly engage in Islamic rituals (including the funeral and marriage rites and even "public lectures") at the behest of district-level Party leaders. Fourth, that fasting during Ramadan has a significant detrimental effect on collective farm productivity. And fifth, that the Kyrgyz do not understand Islam because it is an Uzbek and Tatar religion.

Kuranov's lecture was discussed at a seminar of Kyrgyz agitators. This gathering suggests that consensus did not exist in the Kyrgyz Party on how to de- fine religion, let alone tackle it.17 Another agitator at the seminar, Mansurov, had nothing to say about the lecture's content beyond taking umbrage at its claim that Kyrgyz "people don't wash their children." Kuranov's striking conclusion that only renewed "repression" could solve the problem of Islam was met with a rejoinder that repression could only serve to "reinforce" education and propaganda. Lobanov, an ethnic Russian who apparently presided over

14 One scholar characterizes this sort of propaganda as being "distributed in short bursts." See P. Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 130.

15 For example, the Kyrgyz branch of *Bloknot Agitatora* published articles by local Party "agitators" until well into the 1940s. krsdbma 56/1/330/372 (October 19, 1948).

16 The lecture and discussion referenced here are in krsdbma 56/1/121/82-129 (1940).

17 On the difficulty of defining Islam and Muslims in communist circles, see E. Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 122–123.

the gathering, instructed Kuranov to revise his lecture to highlight the contrast between Muslim patriarchy and the "colossal role of women in the areas of culture and science and industrialization." The notes available on this gathering suggest that confusion and acrimony reigned when discussion turned to basic communist questions about defining and undermining Islam.18 This confusion does not detract from the value of these materials, however: as one of the only individuals in wartime Soviet Kyrgyzstan making the rounds of collective farms with the specific purpose of talking about Islam, Kuranov offers an eyewitness perspective that no historian can afford to dismiss outright. How might one draw out empirical data given his obvious biases and crude generalizations about Kyrgyz Muslim practices?

The answer is to pay particular attention to Kuranov's evidence, while taking his conclusions with a grain of salt. Instances of underage girls being married to older men as second wives through an Islamic marriage contract (Kyrgyz: *nike*), complete with the names of those involved, point to both the gender imbalance in wartime Central Asia and the prevalence of Islamic marriage during the Soviet period. (Kuranov claimed to have compiled evidence of seven hundred such marriages in 1939–1940 in Tian Shan province alone.) Examples of Party officials, again mentioned by name, performing rites at the home of a *mulla* or in a mosque, suggest that religious observance was not uncommon among communist officials. Kuranov also references practitioners: "The bearers of Islamism (*mullas*) are relatively few in Kyrgyzstan, but they are active. In September 1940, one *mulla* publicly got up in a bazar in Jalalabat and gave a sermon of an Islamist character." While the unclear reference to "Islamism" might tempt the reader into dismissing this claim altogether, the statement provides at least one very significant insight: that in parts of wartime Kyrgyzstan, religious practitioners could openly speak to a market crowd about topics somehow related to Islam, an unthinkable occurrence only two years earlier during the Great Terror. Evidence of communist officials practicing religion, religious sermons delivered in marketplaces, and widespread Islamic marriage rites all deepen and enrich our understanding of the social history of the Tian Shan mountains after World War II; all this material can credibly be derived from an unabashedly anti-Islamic source.

By virtue of its data-driven agenda of eradicating religion, it is not difficult to make a case for the value of Kuranov's lecture and the vast, hitherto untapped opus of documentation related to *Znanie* (which would, by the late 1940s, absorb all such activities) to students of Soviet-era Islamic history. Yet a

18 Kuranov's only recorded response to this feedback was: "The Propaganda Department really rushed me on this. I need to sit with this material for at least a month."

significant portion of anti-religious propaganda made no pretense of objectivity and was crafted precisely (and often expertly) to cause offense. No historian of religion under communism can afford to dismiss this major body of literature out of hand. An excellent example of such material is an article that appeared in the anti-religious journal *Nauka i Religiia* in July 1960, i.e., during the most ferocious phase of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign. In this piece, entitled "Bright Light, Dark Shadows," the author, Kamill Ikramov (presumably the Uzbek film director whose 1978 movie, *Khorezm Legend*, takes place in the province), relates colorful personal observations pertaining to Islam made in the course of a visit to Uzbekistan's Xorazm region. Ikramov divides the piece into three parts. First, he vividly describes his first impression of Xorazm at the Urganch airport, contrasting the airport's "great halls, walls of glass, and announcements in three languages" with the "shame" of a completely veiled woman waiting to board a flight "with her brother." Second, Ikramov turns to shrine pilgrimage, the focus of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign in Central Asia.19 He looks up "a saint of great renown"-turned-atheist named Pir Niyaz xo'ja (himself a contributor to the previous month's edition of *Nauka i Religiia*),20 who guides Ikramov to the Muxtar Vali shrine, one of the province's largest and most popular. Here, the author comments extensively on the purported misdeeds of one of the shrine's *shaykh*s, Vaisov:

> Women who are sent by their husbands to be cured of barrenness sometimes stay in Vaisov's hut for a few nights. And if one notes that he is young and healthy, then it should come as no surprise that exactly nine months after the "healing" they give birth.

After some additional pejorative commentary on the shrine, Ikramov turns to the first half of his article's title, "Bright Light," noting by name various Uzbek women who had earned tractor operation certificates or become caretakers of pigs. The article concludes with an exhortation to struggle harder against Islam in Xorazm.21

For obvious reasons, such materials, which span the entire Soviet period, have not been used by scholars of religion, except for those explicitly interested in propaganda and atheism. Yet even a piece as extremely satirical as Ikramov's contains kernels of empirical evidence about the social history of Islam, not to mention some fascinating insights about Xorazm in the 1960s.

19 Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim,* 226.

20 P.N. Khodzha, "Tak gosla moia vera," *Nauka i Religiia* (May 1960): 45.

21 K. Ikramov, "Iarkii svet—rezkie teni," *Nauka i Religiia* (July 1960): 21–27.

First, if one believes the author, the full-body veil (*paranji*) was still being worn in the region (and not only in villages) thirty years after the beginning of the *Hujum.*22 (One might further speculate that the veiled woman and her male companion felt comfortable enough at the airport to engage in conversation with Ikramov: how else could the author have known that the man was her brother?) Second, we have the author's discussion of the Muxtar Vali shrine: this may be the least valuable (not to mention the least reliable) part of the article, yet it recalls the practice, common in Central Asia today, of individual consultations (often related to fertility, marriage, money, or communication with the deceased) with spiritual practitioners and healers in their homes. That such consultations were taking place openly enough for Ikramov to stumble on them at the height of Khrushchev's crackdown on shrines is a significant finding, lending credence to contemporary bureaucratic characterizations of the anti-religious campaign as ineffective and helter-skelter.23 Finally, the author's reference to the pork industry is of great interest. Serving as caretaker of livestock in a collective farm was a position of moderate distinction in the rural Soviet Union, and even if the number of Xorazmian women occupying this position was small, the "progressive" status Ikramov associates with pig caretakers is significant. If nothing else, it points to the contours of upward mobility for Muslim women in the Uzbek SSR.

I have tried to demonstrate that anti-religious propaganda is in fact a source of great value to historians of religion, one that can provide unique insight when employed with a sufficiently critical eye. No source can be denuded of its author's prejudices entirely, but if this were sufficient grounds for excluding an entire genre of material from a field of historical study, our profession would have died out long ago.

The Official Islamic Organizations

The muftiates' public pronouncements have offered an obvious starting point for scholars of Islam in the USSR from Bennigsen onward, yet little attention has been paid to the methodological limitations and possibilities stemming

22 Other pieces of sporadic evidence testify to the *paranji*'s popularity long after the *Hujum*, such as an account by a Soviet bureaucrat of a bus driver refusing entry to a veiled woman and her screaming child in Osh. KRBMA 2597/1s/77/33-39 (1959).

23 Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim,* 238.

from their use.24 Until recently, the muftiates' internal correspondence was not available to researchers, so Bennigsen and his disciples cannot be blamed for their reliance on propaganda produced by these organizations at the Soviet state's request. (Indeed, Bennigsen in particular deserves much credit for bringing the muftiates to Western attention as objects of scholarly inquiry.) A much more important problem with past literature on Soviet Islam is its assumption that the muftiates' pro-Soviet and pro-communist behavior, activities, and *fatwa*s formed part of an insincere, "half-baked," or strategic attempt to "survive" atheism. This is the gist of the claim one encounters in *Mystics and Commissars* that "the official Islamic establishment never attacks Sufism directly but only picks away at some of its less subtle aspects, such as the participation of women in Sufi rites and holy place observances generally."25 This kind of "reading between the lines" may be an appropriate strategy for tackling certain aspects of the study of communist societies, but, when taken too far, obscures the real transformations represented by official pronouncements and even rhetorical grandstanding.

For indeed, the four Soviet muftiates produced the only legal, and by far the most visible, "Islamic media" in the USSR. These included the flagship journal of the Central Asian muftiate, *Muslims of the Soviet East*, books about Central Asian Islamic history, and *fatwa*s issued by muftis.26 Here, I will limit myself to commenting on one specific and illustrative example from the last category. The two modes of analysis that one encounters in existing literature and commentary on sadum both frame these *fatwas* in purely instrumental terms: either the muftiate was slavishly pandering to the Party27 or it was using the communist context as a pretext for importing Saudi Wahhabism into the USSR.28 But by examining a *fatwa* that deals with a mundane aspect of daily life, one can develop a more nuanced argument about the organic growth of "official Islam." The *fatwa* in questions deals with a specific funeral rite common

24 M. Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Late Soviet Union* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

25 A. Bennigsen and S.E. Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars: Sufism in the Soviet Union* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 45.

26 B. Babadzhanov, "O fetvakh sadum protiv 'neislamskikh obychaev,'" in A Malashenko and M. B. Olcott. (eds.), *Islam na postosovetskom prostranstve: vzgliad iznutri* (Moscow: Carnegie Center, 2001), 55–69.

27 S. Poliakov, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia,* trans. A. Olcott (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1992), 106.

28 M.B. Olcott, "Roots of Radical Islam in Central Asia," *Carnegie Papers* 77, January 2007, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp_77_olcott_roots_final.pdf (accessed April 16, 2014).

across the Muslim communities of the USSR: taking turns, the deceased's male relatives and acquaintances carry his coffin from his home to the cemetery for burial while chanting loudly. Often, large crowds accompany the procession and traffic comes to a halt until it has passed through. This practice was targeted by sadum's mufti, Ziyovuddin qori Boboxonov (1908–1982), in a *fatwa* issued in 1963, just as Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign was winding down. The *fatwa* excoriates this practice as contrary to "the mandate of Allah's Holy Book to avoid all kinds of difficulty whenever feasible" and encourages trans- porting the dead by car:

> Often the crowd of people walks through central streets with the most in- tense traffic. In our day and age the conditions of road travel have sharply changed, not to mention that a cumbersome and inconvenient practice at odds with modernity is being justified in the name of the *shari'a*.29

Existing approaches would warrant one of two interpretations. Either the muftiate released this pronouncement on specific instructions from the Party, or it did so on its own initiative to build up progressive credentials. Neither can be disproven; neither convinces. One fact mitigating against these perspectives is that the muftiates rarely issued *fatwa*s that were so specific; indeed, this is the most detailed one on record. Unlike shrine pilgrimage, moreover, such burial processions were never targeted concertedly by the Party. Hence the question: what prompted an opinion on this particular practice?

One compelling potential answer concerns urbanization taking place in the Uzbek capital, where sadum's headquarters was located. The fifteen years after World War II witnessed major work on Tashkent's road and highway system, some of it performed by Japanese prisoners of war. Between 1946 and 1953, urban authorities built 388,000 square meters of living space. In 1951–52, 774,000 square meters of dirt roads were covered in asphalt.30 During the 1950s, moreover, the city hosted several high-profile conferences attended by luminaries from around the world.31 Thus, while the exact circumstances of the *fatwa*'s production cannot be ascertained, the relevance of such a document for at least some of Tashkent's Muslims is understandable. sadum was trying to define the contours of a "progressive" Soviet Islam. To dismiss this project

29 O'zrmda r-2456/1/239/31 (1963).

30 R. Kh. Aminova, *Istoriia sotsialisticheskogo Tashkenta: tom 2.* (Tashkent: Izd. fan, 1966), 159.

31 M. Kirasirova, "'Sons of Muslims' in Moscow: Soviet Central Asian Mediators to the For- eign East, 1955–1992," *Ab Imperio*, 4 (2011): 106–132.

as a purely coercive communist imposition is as untenable as, say, writing off as irrelevant attempts by conservative nationalists in Turkey during the early 1950s to channel Kemalism into a less militantly secular mold.32 As in Turkey and elsewhere, the practice of Islam in Central Asia was changing due to evolving social conditions.

Such official pronouncements are not the only sources available for a socially grounded history of sadum. As its senior leadership is facing increasing scrutiny from Central Asian researchers today, these figures' private correspondence is also coming to light. Consider the example of a remarkable autobiography made available thanks to the resourcefulness and energy of Ashirbek Muminov and Allen Frank.33 The author, Sadauqas Ghylmani (or Saken hazret Gilmanov in Russian), was sadum's *qadi* in Kazakhstan from 1952 to 1972. In this massive account, the author has almost nothing to say about the Soviet period, or, for that matter, sadum or the Communist Party. In fact, the only reference to his election as *qadi* is buried deep in a section called "The Last Portion of My Life." Ghylmani's account is concerned with a very different set of priorities than one encounters in the muftiate's correspondence. His autobiography offers a perspective on the rhythm of religious life and the importance of family and master-disciple relationships in the Muslim communities of northern Kazakhstan. It is also more broadly an insider's view of the social history, at times with ethnographic overtones, of the region it describes. Ghylmani's work can provide details to supplement, enrich, or complicate the linear narrative offered by sadum. For example, he makes it clear that his hiring as an imam was initiated not by the muftiate, but by a delegation of ordinary people from the city of Akmolinsk, who tracked him down in his village and invited him to begin the employment process. There are also details that show the Soviet system's messiness in ways the official correspondence does not permit, for example the *qadi's* description of how several people with the name "Abeke" used the same passport to circumvent travel restrictions (presumably at local level). As more sources such as this are uncovered, the study of official Islam will likely lead to confirmation of some of the inferences I, and others, have tried to make about religious life based on official correspondence and reevaluation of other sources.

32 U. Azak, "Secularism in Turkey as a Nationalist Search for Vernacular Islam: The Ban on the Call to Prayer in Arabic (1932–1950)," *Revue des Mondes Musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 124 (2011): 161–179.

33 S. Ghylmani, *Zamanymyzda bolghan ghulamalardyng ghumyr tarikhtary.* ed. and trans. A. Muminov and A. Frank (Almaty: daik-Press, 2013).

I think much of the resistance to viewing sadum as an organic part of Central Asian Islam stems from the myth of an unchanging faith that "resisted" Soviet rule. This fundamentally colonial idea, which has gained a new lease of life in the hearth of post-Soviet nationalist historiography, is of course not tenable. My objective has solely been to illustrate that the officially aligned *'ulama* formed a legitimate (and arguably the most important) part of the Islamic media landscape, and their output can offer useful insights, particularly when properly contextualized and employed in light of other materials such as the *samizdat* I will discuss next.

Islamic *Samizdat*

If Islamic *samizdat* connotes surreptitious, underground, and actively illegal behavior, then there was virtually no such thing in the Soviet Union. People writing and copying *risola*s, family histories, biographies of *'ulama*, saintly hagiographies, didactic texts and pamphlets, chiliastic tracts, and calendars with prayer times and the dates of major holidays appear to have done so openly, with little fear of retaliation, for the bulk of Soviet history.34 I am using the term here to engage with it by suggesting that "home-made" religious texts represent a major continuity with the pre- and post-Soviet periods and were a permanent feature of Islamic practice in the USSR. 35 That is to say, they constituted a permanent and fairly uncontroversial feature of communism.

Admittedly, the picture changed somewhat in the Islamophobic climate that reigned from the mid-1970s onward. At this point, the state identified clandestine religious materials as explicitly political, even when they were not. In 1981, the KGB caught and interrogated Muslims distributing photocopies of the Qur'an in Arabic.36 The same fate often met Muslims distributing cassettes featuring sermons by unregistered imams.37 (It bears emphasizing that such official suspicion targeted illegal Protestant groups even more systematically during this period.38) Yet the political intent attributed to these materials by

34 For example, a handwritten letter in Volga Tatar predicting the end of the world, widely distributed in northern Kyrgyzstan in 1956 to much effect, failed to generate an official investigation. KRBMA 2597/1s/57/93 (April 9, 1956).

35 See a classic discussion of "Sufi samizdat" in Bennigsen and Wimbush, *Mystics and Commissars*, 88–90.

36 KRBMA 2597/2s/114/117 (February 19, 1982).

37 O'zrmda r-2456/1/674/128-131 (May 6, 1983).

38 For example, the head of an illegal Baptist "printing house" in northern Kyrgyzstan was sentenced to three years in prison in 1971. KRBMA 2597/2/93/145 (February 22, 1972).

government officials should not detract from the broader picture that emerges of Islamic *samizdat* as a ubiquitous, and relatively unproblematic, feature of Muslim life in the USSR.

These materials pose difficulties for historians interested in social change. Although they do provide a rare "bottom-up" voice to counter the totalizing pretensions of bureaucrats, agitators, atheistic scholars, and sadum's *'ulama*, they rarely reference concrete events in Soviet history. Indeed, some of these texts seem to have a deceptively simple "timeless" quality, at least for Soviet historians who often assess a source first and foremost in terms of where it falls in broader periodizations of the USSR. By contrast, the authors of these materials evinced no interest in situating them within contemporary events, trends, or institutions. They can instead be read as an expression of some sense of connection to the broader Islamic world and of the enduring relevance of Islamic symbolism, cosmology, and genres of religious literature in the tumultuous context of Soviet modernization.

An important example of such a source is a *risola* associated with the cult of the Throne of Solomon, a holy mountain jutting out of the center of Kyrgyzstan's "southern capital," Osh.39 This text circulated in the city in the 1940s and 1950s and bears a certain similarity to older, documented legends associated with the mountain's cult.40 In Central Asia and other parts of the Islamic world, *risola*s were traditionally devotional prayers whose recitation was associated with a specific craft (e.g., blacksmiths, woodworkers).41 In the Soviet period, however, the term was used (in bureaucratic correspondence, at least) to refer to widely disseminated, handwritten religious texts. A local government representative obtained a copy of such a *risola* from the imam of a sadum-run mosque in Osh; he explained that multiple versions of the *risola*, of varying lengths, circulated in the city. The imam told him that "very many similar books are in the possession of believers, who steadfastly conceal them." What has come down in the archive is a Russian-language translation the bureaucrat made of part of this *risola* (originally in Uzbek in the Arabic script), which he

39 For an important discussion of the cult of this mountain in modern times, see M. Liu, *Under Solomon's Throne: Uzbek Visions of Renewal in Osh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012).

40 The legend of the mountain is recounted in Zimin's 1913 description published in Tashkent. See V. L. Ogudin, "Tron Solomona: istoriia formirovaniia kul'ta," in S. N. Abashin and V. O. Bobrovnikov (eds.), *Podvizhniki Islama: kul't sviatykh i sufizm v Srednei Azii i na Kavkaze* (Moscow: Vostochnaia literatura, 2003), 68.

41 J.E. Dagyeli, "La construction des identités collectives d'après des corps de métier (risala) en Asie centrale," *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale*, 19–20 (2011): 73–84.

forwarded to Moscow on the grounds of "the need to study the religious movement;" sadly, he did not include the original in the file.42

The *risola* seeks not only to underscore Osh's holiness, but also to delineate its significance in the sacred geography of the Islamic world. Its main purpose is to emphasize Osh's high stature among holy cities and sites of Muslim pilgrimage. For an historian of religion and politics, or of social life, in Soviet Central Asia, what is the best way to approach such a document? First and foremost, it is worth pausing to reflect on its very existence and apparent popularity. The letter was translated in 1948, exactly a decade after the Great Terror ended. One can probably assume that disseminating such materials during the Terror was risky, given the campaigns against "counter-revolutionary" underground publishing. By the late 1940s, however, it appears that the risk of official censure constituted a lukewarm deterrent.

What does this *risola* tell us about Muslim beliefs and practices in Soviet Central Asia? Or rephrased more loosely: how might a Muslim living under communism, a decade after the region's most concerted assault on religion, have read (or heard) the legends recounted in this *risola*? One can only respond with educated speculation—but such speculation is warranted and indeed necessary, for without it, the *risola* becomes an artifact of an unchanging and timeless "folk Islam." If such a thing had existed, then, logically, its practitioners must also have been unchanging and timeless, a proposition no historian can accept.

Above all, the *risola* seeks to remind its readers of Osh's centrality to the Muslim world. It reproduces an apocryphal *hadith* stating that "according to 'Umar, Muhammad personally told him: 'When they elevated me to heaven one night during the *miraj,* I beheld the East and the West from the fourth heaven, and saw a light in the East.'"43 When Muhammad asked the Angel Gabriel about the light's source, Gabriel explained that it was a mountain housing a mosque built by the Prophet Solomon. At Muhammad's request, Gabriel elevated the mountain to the fourth heaven so that he could pray there. This prophetic association forms the basis of the *risola*'s claim that "before embarking upon the pilgrimage to Mecca for Arabs [i.e., the Hajj], one must perform the pilgrimage for non-Arabs" to the Throne of Solomon.

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42 The translation of the *risola* upon which this discussion is based is in KRBMA 2597/1s/5/ 42-46 (September 13, 1948).

43 The Muslim belief in Muhammad's ascension to Heaven has historically had a significant impact on literature, philosophy, rituals, and popular religion across the Islamic world. See C. Gruber and F. Colby (eds.), *The Prophet's Ascension: Cross-Cultural Encounters with the Islamic Mi'raj Tales* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010).

Although this legend predates the communist period by several centuries at least, its added significance in the Soviet context is not difficult to discern. A number of historical contingencies can be pieced together to reconstruct the context in which this particular legend might have been interpreted by the Muslims engaging with it. Central Asians had been unable to perform the Hajj (legally, at least) since the nep period. Perhaps more important, in the Central Asian context, was the closure of the border with Afghanistan. This measure effectively destroyed the vibrant pilgrimage network encompassing Afghan and Russian Turkestan. The most salient contemporary development was the state's widely publicized decision to allow a handful of officially aligned *'ulama* to perform the Hajj in 1945.44 Whether most Muslims responded to this decision with joy or with anger at the small number of *hajji*s permitted to leave the country is impossible to discern. But one can assert with reasonable confidence that most of the inhabitants of Osh, and the tens of thousands of pilgrims traveling to the Throne of Solomon each year, would have been aware of the newly legalized Hajj: the departure to Mecca of the city's most prominent registered imam all but acquired the dimensions of a municipal holiday.45 More important, perhaps, were the visitation statistics at the Throne of Solomon around the time this *risola* made its appearance in the archive. The number of pilgrims at the shrine on the two *'eids* soared into the tens of thousands starting in the late 1940s, increasing each year until Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign a decade later.46 In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the cult of the Throne of Solomon was at a height perhaps unparalleled at any point in the century, and the Hajj was, politically, a hot-button topic.

Bringing all these contextual elements together to bear upon the *risola*'s account of Muhammad singling out Osh as a "light in the East" during his *miraj*, one could suggest that the holy mountain's status as a "Mecca for non-Arabs" acquired renewed salience stemming from constraints present in Soviet Central Asia in the late 1940s. The *risola*'s apparent popularity can be taken not only as evidence of a resurgence in the mountain's cult, but also as a response to the renewed spotlight on the Hajj. It also demonstrates that religious institutions and practices regenerated themselves on the basis of longstanding aspects of Muslim life. Far from constituting an artifact of pre-Soviet history, a relatively immutable document such as the *risola* formed part of a revitalization of pilgrimage to the Throne of Solomon at levels not even observed in the

44 The last recorded reference to pilgrims from the Soviet Union in Mecca appears in British sources in 1929. Y. Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 171 n. 286.

45 Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim,* 112.

46 Ibid., 233.

nineteenth century. In this case, at least, the continuities in religious life be- tween the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods formed part of an Islamic "revival" thanks to, not in spite of, Soviet conditions.

When one begins to ponder the meaning time-honored sources and practices might have acquired for historical actors in the very novel conditions of Soviet Central Asia, one has to make suggestions that cannot be definitively proven. Skeptics may dismiss such rumination as a waste of time, yet some parts of the *risola* cry out for a more historical, and even more emotional, con- textualization. Consider the following legend concerning a saint associated with the mountain contained in the document:

> The residents of Osh wanted to build a fortress. An enormous boulder stood on the spot where they planned to put it up. The people wanted to place this boulder in the fortress's foundation, but when everyone, young and old, assembled, they could not make it budge. When they explained the situation to Xo'ja Ahmad Arkam, he responded, "Go home, and with God's help, I will help you tomorrow." The people went home. In the evening Xo'ja Ahmad Arkam went to the construction site, lifted the boulder, and placed it in the fortress's foundation. When the people saw next morning that the boulder had been placed where it needed to be, they understood what Xo'ja Ahmad Arkam had done and recognizedhis holiness.

The legend, dealing with the fairly conventional topic of miraculous saintly intercession into worldly difficulties, evokes imagery associated with construction, natural obstacles, and herculean feats of strength, all themes deeply prevalent in Soviet society in the two decades preceding this *risola*'s entry into the archive. Of course, no evidence exists to substantiate the claim that Central Asian Muslims linked this fable, negatively or positively, with the Communist Party's mobilization of society during the First Five Year Plan or again during the war. Yet the text undeniably mirrors socialist realist imagery of industry and progress that the era's readers might have encountered in contemporary art and fiction in Russian translation and Central Asian languages. (The early Soviet cult of the blacksmith provides one potential example.47) Nor was the reproduction of the cult of sainthood and miracles in distinctly Soviet settings unheard of: Ulan Bigozhin's account of the "miracle with the tractor" in 1953 in a Kazakh *kolkhoz* involves an "active-duty saint" who is also renowned as a tractor mechanic. This episode features a group prayer that brings a dead

47 V.E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), 23.

tractor to life in the freezing cold.48 In much the same way, treating the *risola* as an integral product of the Soviet landscape, rather than as a bastion of pre- Soviet Islam, allows us to conceptualize Islamic *samizdat* in the way most Soviet Muslims probably understood it: as an ongoing aspect not only of religious life, but of life in general.

Conclusion

The Soviet state's claims to have weakened religion, and its apparent success in sidelining religious media in the public sphere, should not be taken at face value, for these claims rest on an arbitrary distinction between the religious and the secular, the Muslim and the Soviet. Despite officials' undeniable hostility toward Islam during certain periods of Soviet history, a vibrant landscape of Islamic media sustained the experience of practicing Islam under communist rule. Some of these media, it turns out, were sponsored directly by the Soviet state.

The implication for historians is that materials produced, or sanctioned, by even the most overtly anti-religious sectors of the Party-state can be mined for insights about the social history of Islam. For now, Central Asianists lack alter- native materials that could provide a comparable level of detail about social change and religious practices. The sometimes extreme constraints on historians imposed by these sources—be it their hostility toward religion or the clandestine environment in which they circulated—need not deter the social historian, for, if anything, these constraints illustrate the extent to which religion was a ubiquitous presence in all aspects of Soviet life.

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48 U. Bigozhin, *Shrine, State, and Sacred Lineage in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan* (PhD diss., Indiana University, 2017), 98.