Book Discussion

Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia, by Eren Tasar

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The World as Seen from the Muftiate's Windows

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In mid-October 2004, Tashkent was my home, or at least I thought it was at the time. I had been living there almost continuously for three years, after a short stint in Samarqand in the year 2000, working on my doctoral dissertation. Al-Qaeda's heinous attack against the World Trade Centre in New York had changed the world as we had known it in the meantime, and Central Asia too was privy to that change. For a few years after 9/11, Uzbekistan supplied logistic support to fly coalition forces to Afghanistan in pursuit of the Taliban, and men of the beefy type parading their military gear were often in sight in Tashkent. So there I was teaching Italian in the morning to a group of Uzbek parachutists within the framework of a NATO exchange program, spending my afternoons between the Central State and former KGB archives, and wasting my evenings after the last gleams of Soviet cosmopolitan culture. But above all I was spending a great deal of time just hanging around with imams and aspiring mullahs, local historians and Orientalists, and antique dealers in an effort to explore the Islamic culture of the region, an edifice of knowledge demanding the mastery of many languages, and a sustained experience of engagement with often intricate texts.

One early morning of that October 2004 my mobile phone rang. It was a lady by the name of Fotima who worked at the Tashkent central postal office. She had noticed me, she said, a week before while I was frantically sending parcels of books to Italy, then my place of residence. She never told me how she had got hold of my number. Instead, she told me that she was renovating her family house, and when tearing down a wall, workers uncovered a library of hidden manuscripts. In fact, she was inviting me to inspect all those texts written in

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Arabic, Persian, and Chaghatay to get a sense of their value. It wasn't unusual for me to receive such unsolicited calls: strangers did not pass unobserved in Tashkent in those days and I was the only Italian in town with a modicum of Russian and Uzbek driving a red Peugeot 205 with diplomatic number plates.

And off I went to Fotima's house. When I reached her place and began to examine the books, I was immediately confronted by a question: why would people in Soviet Uzbekistan hide manuscripts written in the Arabic script? The woman explained to me that this library belonged in fact to her grandfather who had completed his studies in a madrasa in Samarqand at the end of the 19th century. When I asked later on whether she had been aware of all these manuscripts before they began renovating her house, she looked rather annoyed. "Of course, I knew about them", she thundered. "All these books were not just buried behind a wall during the Soviet period. They were alive and well with my family! My father used them in the late 1970s and 1980s to teach Islam to students coming from the Tashkent *oblast* and beyond." So there I was standing on a construction site, surrounded by heaps of manuscripts from the 18th and the 19th century, and listening to a story I was unable to make sense of. "Was what your father did illegal?" I then asked. At first she was surprised by my question, then she threw me a condescending look and said: "Of course, it was illegal, my son (*bolam!*), to run an underground religious circle: the Soviet Union was an atheist state after all!"

Sixteen years later today I still remember with fondness Fotima's condescending look, a look that lives in with me as a memento of all the things Central Asian I do not and cannot understand. This story serves as a reminder that in 1991, the year in which the Soviet Union collapsed, there could be many other similar stories, as Central Asia was in fact home to millions of Muslims. The few times I have told this story, colleagues and friends have dismissed it with derision as a rhabdomancer's tale, a borderline exoteric cultural encounter that could happen only to me because I was in fact looking for such things. So, when Eren Tasar's *Soviet and Muslim* came out, I finally felt vindicated.

Soviet and Muslim is an innovative, indeed groundbreaking work of historical scholarship on Islam in post-WWII Central Asia, and essential reading for anyone who wants to understand why the Soviet transformative project of atheism and forced secularization encountered major obstacles in this region that once belonged to the USSR. Tasar's main objective is to draw our attention to what he coins the "Islamic sphere" of post-Stalinist Central Asia, i.e., "the constellation of Islamic practices, sites, figures, and institutions […], which was an organic and evolving part of being Muslim under Communist rule." Additionally, Tasar supplies a convincing interpretive framework to explain why and how such an "Islamic sphere" could exist continuously until the end of Soviet rule.

It should be clarified from the very outset that *Soviet and Muslim* is not a historical anthropology of Islam, for it does not focus on the social contexts in which devotional practices were recorded in Soviet Central Asia; nor does this book present itself as an exercise in intellectual history. Experts of Islamic studies will not find therein a fine-grained discussion of the production, transmission, and reception of specific writing traditions originating from earlier epochs. Tasar's monograph does, however, something more ambitious. It explains what made possible the carving out of a substantial space for Islam in an environment ideologically hostile to religion and one which is usually considered bereft of manifestations of religiosity, either individual or public. Tasar has formulated this new interpretation not by sifting through unpublished ethnographic materials or parsing the private archives of figures of Islamic knowledge or sanctity. His argument, instead, is firmly based on the bureaucratic output of two Soviet institutions, i.e., the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) and the Central Asian Muftiate (SADUM), which represent a body of literature designed to distort, minimize, and conceal the importance of Muslimness under Soviet rule. This type of documentation therefore poses substantial hermeneutic challenges. This is a point I shall touch upon later in this review. But now I would like to turn my attention to the following excerpt of *Soviet and Muslim*, where the originality of Tasar's argument can best be appreciated:

> [2] 'During World War II, Stalin introduced a series of reforms to normalize church-state relations. […] Although the Communist Party maintained its formal commitment to liquidating religion and spreading atheism, the reforms created a new organisation, the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), dedicated to the principle that the anti-religious struggle must consist solely in ideas, with no violation of the believers' constitutional right to freedom of conscience. Party members subscribing to this moderate line toward religion maintained that the final eradication of religion could only occur through strict observance of Soviet legality. […] Known by the Russian acronym SADU, […] the Central Asian Muftiate emerged in 1943 as the result of one of Stalin's reforms permitting the reopening of some organizations (e.g., the Moscow patriarchate) and the creation of others. […] The Muftiate rapidly set about marketing its dogmatic pronouncements as a blueprint for progressive and heavily bureaucratized "Soviet Islam." Over time, CARC bureaucrats and the Islamic scholars leading this organization (the legally registered *ulama*) came to depend on one another in ways Stalin surely had never envisioned.'

The implications of this argument are colossal. First, it clarifies that the experiment of alliance, which CARC and SADUM carried out in the 1940s and the 1950s, represented the major force behind the bureaucratization of Islam in Soviet Central Asia. By instrumentalizing CARC's belief in the freedom of conscience, SADUM facilitated the transition of an impressive number of mosque communities from underground existence to full legal status. The legalization of a Muslim parish (be it a mosque or a shrine community) revolved around a bureaucratic process of "registration," whereby a community of believers petitioned SADUM for recognition while the latter interceded to CARC in Moscow by explaining why such a community warranted registration. In doing so, Tasar shows, SADUM could effectively expand its network of trusted affiliates and come to be regarded as a bastion for Muslimness in the Soviet context. If a congregation of believers wanted to lobby for a specific savant to become their imam, SADUM was the institution facilitating the employment process by means of registration.1 This is what we learn from the autobiography of Saduaqas Ghylmany, for example, the *qadi* of the Kazakh SSR between 1952 and 1972, whose appointment to the post of imam in Akmolinsk (today Nur-Sultan) depended on the shrewdness of a delegation that tracked him down in a collective farm in 1946. The people of Akmolinsk first "made" him an imam; then followed SADUM's registration as *imam-khatib*, Ghylmany tells us.2

Second, Tasar's argument convincingly demonstrates that "registration" represented the conspicuous feature of the bureaucratization of Islam in the USSR. Here, we should give credit to Tasar for having explained this more clearly than anyone else had done before. In his *Islam in the USSR*, Yaacov Ro'i did in fact adopt "registered" and "non-registered" institutions as taxonomical categories,3 without considering how the act of registration rendered Islamic institutions *dynamic* and *mutable* (a non-registered mosque could become a registered one) and empowered SADUM to assert its own institutional agency. When one takes this central aspect of bureaucratization into account, one is better equipped to understand that Khrushchev's much discussed anti-religious policies often amounted to either denying or withdrawing registration from communities of believers. The unintended effect of such policies, as it emerged from Tasar's crystal-clear and engaging prose, was to push entire

1 *Zhaloby grazhdan i perepiska po nim s Upolnomochennym po delam religioznykh kul'tov (na arabsk. iaz.), 1959*, Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 149.

2 S. Ghylmani, *Zamanymyzda bolghan ghulamalardyng ghumyr tarikhtary*. ed. and trans. A. Muminov and A. Frank (Almaty: Daik-Press, 2013): 531–32.

3 Y. Ro'i, *Islam in the Soviet Union from the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London: C. Hurst, 2000).

segments of the "Islamic sphere" back into illegality and in a situation of perceived dependence on SADUM's recognition. This is best synthesized in the following passage: (370) "a key conclusion of this book is that Stalin's religious reforms created a vacuum that the Tashkent *Muftiate* and its partner CARC, filled while no one was looking. When someone (Khrushchev) did finally 'look', it was too late to reverse the processes of Islam's institutionalization that had commenced in [the] 1940s and flowered during the 1950s. It was the atheist's [untenable] project that gave both CARC and SADUM so much flexibility to experiment [with], and even at the height of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign, benefit from the Party's lack of clarity on the question of religion. Put succinctly, atheism worked to the *Muftiate*'s advantage in key respects."

The third implication of Tasar's argument is this: if one agrees (as I do) that the approach of the Soviet state towards religion was one of caution and conciliation, one begins to understand that everything violent and excessive in Soviet state-church relations as we know it from the 1920s and the 1930s was the exception and not the rule. This is a topic that undoubtedly merits more attention by historians of the USSR and specialists of *Religionswissenschaft* than what has been accorded so far. That Soviet anti-religious policies in the inter-war period were marred and often defied by their fragmentariness, internal contradictions, and messiness has already been noted by Shoshana Keller in her *To Moscow, not Mecca*.4 When one shifts one's attention to the post-WWII period, however, one finds that in Central Asia Soviet atheism and forced secularization can hardly be regarded as an accomplished iconoclastic movement. It is clear, for example, that the preservation of shrines (together with an indulgent approach of the state to shrine communities) allowed for the making of a collective memory space, that is, a place in which the past was mobilized in the present by means of narration. In turn this situation facilitated the reproduction and transmission of an Islamic episteme.5

Fourth (and directly related to the third implication), *Soviet and Muslim*'s sustained attention to practices of bureaucratization invites us to reflect upon the fact that, contrary to common wisdom, there operated in post-WWII Central Asia a range of individuals embodying and offering various kinds of Islamic knowledge. This makes perfect sense when one considers that most of these people whom we can rightly call "scholars of Islam" were born at the turn of the 20th century when in the madrasas of cities like Samarqand,

4 S. Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2001).

5 See P. Sartori, "Of Saints, Shrines, and Tractors: Untangling the Meaning of Islam in Soviet Central Asia," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 30.3 (2019), 367–405.

Bukhara, Kokand, and Khiva mullahs were graduating by the hundreds. One finds an endless string of *imam*s' "biographies" (*tarjimai hol*) crafted in the 1950s when mosque communities requested registration, in the 1960s when a process of full rehabilitation began (ironically) under Khrushchev's restriction, or in the early 1980s when the state carried out a new census of "unregistered mullahs."6 It would be useful here to remind ourselves that these scholars played a prominent role in running underground Islamic teaching throughout the Soviet period. Muhammadjon Rustamov 'Hindustonyi' is the most famous among a much broader community of scholars which operated illegally but often with the tacit sanction of state institutions, including the surveillance apparatus (KGB)—the contours of which we are still unable to see clearly. It would be interesting of course to know when things began to change, that is, when the older generation of scholars began to be replaced by mullahs trained either solely according to the Sovietized Islamic curriculum, which conferred less significance on religious texts in Persian or in Chaghatay than on scripturalist readings requiring proficiency in Arabic, and which was informed by Orientalist tastes, among other things. Tasar is the first to have noted and looked at this transition, but there is ample room to pursue this line of research further.

When speaking about Islamic knowledge, a note of caution is in order here. *Soviet and Muslim* has done a lot to show how SADUM's personnel and a rich cohort of unregistered mullahs developed anti-Sufi sensibilities, which were further deployed to delegitimize devotional practices directed at the worship of saints. Such strong rigorist tendencies notwithstanding, SADUM never achieved the full marginalization of Sufis and other figures of knowledge who equally played a major role in the Islamic religious sphere of Soviet Central Asia. Soviet ethnographers have produced a massive body of scholarship unmistakably showing that between the 1950s and 1980s such figures of knowledge were everywhere to be seen, both in urban and rural contexts:7 shaykhs, healers, fortune-tellers, sorcerers,8 and members of hereditary lineages (*xo'ja*s and *eshon*s) occupied socially significant functions in Muslim communities living under Soviet rule. To be sure, there have been a new wave of studies illuminating how intellectual practices of Sufi derivation (here very broadly conceived) reproduced themselves and adapted to changing circumstances in

6 M. Buttino, *Samarcanda: storie in una città dal 1945 a oggi* (Napoli: Viella, 2015): 124–126.

7 I am following here the lead of D. DeWeese, "Shamanization in Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 57.3 (2014): 326–63.

8 A detailed ethnographic portrait of a sorcerer operating during the 1980s is in V.N. Basilov, "Dukhi shamanki Momoxal," in *Etnicheskaia istoriia i traditsionnaia kul'tura narodov Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana*, ed. N. Palagin (Nukus: Karakalpakstan, 1989): 138–49.

post-war decades.9 However, a social history of Sufism in Soviet Central Asia remains a desideratum.10

The fifth implication of Tasar's argument is that we need to rethink the meaning of religion and its scope in an environment—i.e. the USSR—which one often imagines as fully secularized. Secularizing forces were no doubt at play in post-WWII Central Asia, but it need not be that such forces led to the disappearance of strong religious inclinations, however expressed. Secularism was and remains a mighty ideology and the Soviet state could rely on massive (though not infinite) resources to pursue a transformative project of modernization, which was firmly built upon such an ideological tenet. However, as shown beautifully throughout the narrative arc of *Soviet and Muslim*, the Soviet secularizing mission was never fully accomplished. While agitators' cries for the strengthening of the "ideological work" (*ideologicheskaia rabota*) morphed over time into meaningless bureaucratic formulae, the achievement of atheism was cyclically postponed, until it was no more. In fact, anyone with some working experience with the same documentation examined by Tasar knows just how often the Soviet state genuflected before the resilience of Muslimness. It is important to reflect on the capitulation of Soviet secularism before Islam because all too often scholars have assumed that in a situation of radical modernization such as the USSR the ideology of secular- ism can work as some kind of antidote against religiosity. As the late Sonja Luehrmann first suggested, one should do well to question the genealogy of this assumption,11 for the belief in the afterlife, the spirits, and supernatural forces has been a constant, indeed pervasive feature of everyday life among many Central Asians under communist rule. One is reminded of the dedication with which the staff of SADUM and CARC fought a hopeless battle against

9 E. Tasar, "Sufism on the Soviet Stage: Holy People and Places in Central Asia's Socio-Political Landscape after World War II," in *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th–21st Centuries*, ed. D. DeWeese and J.-A. Gross (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018): 256–83; A. Frank, *Gulag Miracles: Sufis and Stalinist Repression in Kazakhstan* (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2019); S. Dudoignon, "A Surrogate Aristocracy? Sufi *Adab*, Modernity, Rurality and Civilisation in Ex-Soviet Central Asia." In *Adab and Modernity: A "Civilising" Process? (Sixteenth-Twenty First Century)*, ed. C. Mayeur-Jaouen (Leiden: Brill, 2020): 527–51.

10 D. DeWeese, "Re-Envisioning the History of Sufi Communities in Central Asia: Continuity and Adaptation in Sources and Social Frameworks, 16th–20th Centuries," in *Sufism in Central Asia: New Perspectives on Sufi Traditions, 15th–21st Centuries*, ed. D. DeWeese and J.-A. Gross (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2018): 21–66.

11 S. Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): 15.

*risola*s,12 a compositional genre embodying devotional prayers associated with a specific guild (such as the blacksmiths, tailors, cooks and other) and which were addressed to a patron saint.13 The attention that CARC and SADUM paid to *risola*s speaks volumes about the broad recognition that Soviet Muslims in Central Asia conferred upon Islamic writing traditions within their own specific and modern environments.14 I want to pause to reflect on this specific phenomenon because it should alert us to the *scope* which religiosity enjoyed under communist rule. This is an aspect of Soviet social history which warrants further industry, even if Soviet ethnographers already brought it repeatedly to our attention. Gleb Snesarev, for example, operating as he was under the constraints of censorship, noted diligently that in the 1950s in Khorezm taxi drivers adopted rituals of initiation and disciplinary practices of Sufi derivation.15 I confined my observation here only to the genre of *risola*, but one could expand one's source basis and include, for example, apocalyptic texts called *vasiyatnoma*. Circulating widely in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, they became a *bête noir* for the CARC in the 1950s, which repeatedly requested the assistance of SADUM to prove said texts to be breaking with conventions from the point of view of Islamic scriptures and creeds.16

The major takeaway of Tasar's argument is that the Party-state adopted religion "as a category for understanding the population" (4) precisely because

12 SADUM issued a series of fatwas addressing either directly and or less so the phenomenon of *risola*s. The last legal opinion targeting this subject was crafted as late as in 1983 by Shamsuddin Boboxonov and bore the curious title "On the harm caused by [illegal] booksellers" *(yangi chiqqan kitobfurushlar zararlari haqida)*, see Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, R-2456, op. 1, d. 740, ll. 1–6.

13 Originally emerging from an ecosystem of earlier hagiographic traditions, *risola*s came to be regarded in the Soviet period as a catch-all genre for Islamic religious tracts. See, E. Tasar, "Islamic Media in Soviet Central Asia," *Central Asian Affairs* 6 (2019): 108.

14 Evidence of reading practices based upon Islamic manuscripts and lithographs in Kokand in the 1980s can be found in A. Erkinov, "Livres manuscrits et milieu féminin en Asie Centrale: contenu et audience des recueils poétiques copiés par des femmes à Kokand du XIXe au début du XXe siècle," *Eurasian Studies* XII (2014): 409.

15 G.P. Snesarev, "O nekotorykh prichinakh sokhraneniia religiozno-bytovykh perezhit- kov u Uzbekov Khorezma (Po polevym materialam 1954–1956 gg. Uzbekskogo otri- ada Khorezmskoi arkheologo-etnograficheskoi ekspeditsii)," *Sovetskaia Etnografiia*, (1957/2): 71.

16 Tasar, "Islamic Media in Soviet Central Asia," 107 fn. 34. I know of another major case that kept CARC busy in 1951 when officials found out about an apocalyptic text writ- ten by Chechens in Arabic and circulating among Kazakhs and Kyrgyz in translation. CARC's Moscow-based plenipotentiary Polianskii requested from SADUM an Islamically- informed refutation of said texts. See Central State Archive of Uzbekistan, f. R-2456, op. 1, d. 134, ll. 9–15. An interesting example of apocalyptic text is described in T. Welsford and N. Tashev, *A Catalogue of Arabic-Script Document from the Samarqand Museum* (Samarqand-Istanbul: International Institute for Central Asian Studies, 2012) 118, doc. 141.

the state knew that Islam mattered to Central Asians. To put this aspect of Soviet Islam into relief is a monumental achievement, for it turns most previous scholarship on its head, and provides a simple, though persuasive framework to explain why Soviet archives are flooded with descriptions of Muslims' religiosity, which are more redolent of ethnographic tastes than censorial concerns. With Tasar, we are finally able to recognize that the Party-state mobilized substantial resources to make sense of Muslimness rather than simply target it as an enemy. We can make a further move and begin to question why and how Soviet secularist and modernizing societies accommodated and preserved profound religious sensibilities. Needless to say, this question is immediately relevant for us today. As I write these lines, the world is experiencing the worst pandemic crisis since the Spanish flu. And while the most modern and best equipped public health systems of our societies are on the verge of collapse under the strain of this challenge, images of Pope Francis kissing the miraculous crucifix that is said to have saved Romans from the plague in 1552 have gone viral across social media.

While Tasar must be commended for having developed an important argument, I equally have some reservations concerning other aspects of his work. The scope of the scholarly and spiritual authority, which SADUM commanded among Muslim constituencies outside of Tashkent is hardly addressed in his book, and one would like to know more about the circles of scholars that either supported or battled against the Babakhanovs and their entourage. In the first chapter, for example, we learn that over three years (1947–1950) SADUM lost twice to Shafoat Hoji Xoliqnazarov in Osh (vs Solihkhoja and Nazarbekov). This was not an exception. Research that I have conducted together with Bakhtiyar Babajanov shows that SADUM's authority was disputed throughout its existence openly and at different levels.17 In addition, Tasar noted that fundamentalist trends manifested themselves among Central Asian *ulama* more forcefully since the 1970s. However, fundamentalism appeared much earlier and originated from Islamic reformist circles. In fact, it belonged to SADUM from its own inception as personified by scholars like Olimxon To'ra Shakirxo'jaev, the *qadi* of the Kyrgyz SSR.18 We also encounter Islamic fundamentalism as a resource mobilized *instrumentally* to preserve one's status in the competition among *ulama* to accrue power and spiritual authority. Dismissed from his post as an imam in 1947, Xoliqnazarov launched a campaign to cast himself

17 P. Sartori and B Babajanov, "Tell the Mufti: Questioning SADUM's Authority, 1960s–1980s," in *Authority and Islam in Central Eurasia*, ed. D. DeWeese, R. Sela, P. Sartori (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming).

18 P. Sartori and B Babajanov, "Being Soviet, Muslim, Modernist, and Fundamentalist in 1950s Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62.1 (2019): 108–165.

as an arch-puritan in the eyes of the CARC and accused SADUM of profiting from what he deemed popular superstitions such as the cult of saints and shrine visitation (63–65). At the same time, Xoliqnazarov did not refrain from receiving pilgrims' attention. After visiting the Throne of Solomon in Osh, we are told, people worshipped him like a holy man (71–72). How do we define, then, Xoliqnazarov's rigorist puritanism? As we find that CARC's functionaries too found his behavior rather ambiguous, if not problematic (130–131), we are reminded that nothing is what it seems: Xoliqnazarov could be puritan and lenient at the same time.

As I have moved from a sketch of the major interpretive implications of the argument expounded in *Soviet and Muslim* to the examination of some granular details of the book, I would like now to devote the remainder of the space afforded to me in this forum to address an aspect of Tasar's work that warrants further reflection. I do so in hope of sparking a discussion among historians of Islam in Soviet Central Asia and religion in the USSR more generally. As I mentioned at the outset, *Soviet and Muslim* is based upon a careful and original examination of a massive body of archival records. The bulk of these sources are in fact the output of two Soviet institutions (CARC and SADUM) whose guiding principles have been to preserve the constitutional right of freedom of conscience (p. 306), promote specific interpretations of Islam, and contain, discourage, and curtail manifestations of religiosity deemed unorthodox. Such records further reflect the concerns of Soviet bureaucrats handling sensitive topics, the crafting of which often needed adjustments, amendments, and omissions to pass muster. Moreover, changing political circumstances often pushed such bureaucrats either to emphasize or minimize the significance of what they were asked to report about. Counting heads at a saint day festival, for example, or reflecting upon attendance at a sermon marking the Prophet's birthday (Ar. *mavlud*) could have different outcomes. CARC's regional representatives could persuade readers in Moscow about the need to increase surveillance means and, concomitantly, legitimize their own institutional role. But their reports could also be read as failures in the business of agitation and propaganda, thereby leading to a dismissal from office and the hiring of some-one else deemed a better fit for the same task.

So, how do we make sense of such records? Can historians trust them? This is a question that Luehrmann formulated openly in her work while attempting to come to terms with the ineluctable presence of religion in the Soviet archives. She also invited historians to do something more sophisticated than merely approach such sources *linguistically*, that is, to envision them as fragments of a discourse. Though speaking bureaucratese, such records do something else than just shed light on the life of the institutions that generated them, she says. The documentary value of such records, suggests Luehrmann, gestures at the

social environment that breathed life into them.19 Formulated in these terms, this makes for a truly bold argument. In fact, this methodological move pales in comparison to what medievalists have done in the past. As a general rule, if historians have been able to elicit sets of beliefs and reassemble their attendant systems of meanings from the archives of the inquisition, one wonders what really constitutes the insurmountable hermeneutic challenges offered by the Soviet archives. Or are we instead to believe that Soviet archival records are inherently more biased than those, say, of the Roman inquisition and the Salem witch trials? The answer must be in the negative, and for good reason: every record contains elements out of authorial control.20 I recognize this observation may strike the reader as breathtakingly banal. However, elsewhere have I shown that even the minutes of interrogations of *ulama* produced in 1937 and 1938 include material that could shed light on the *Weltanschauung* of the Muslim scholars who were murdered by the NKVD during the Great Terror in Central Asia.21 Is this a particularly original point? No it isn't. But there seem to be a reluctance among historians of religion in the Soviet Union to take on the hermeneutic challenge posed by archival records and do what any professional historian should do: take them seriously and reflect upon their documentary possibilities. This is what Tasar has done in *Soviet Muslim*. He has pierced the bureaucratic veil enveloping CARC and SADUM's records to offer new vistas on the world of Islam in post-WWII Central Asia.

Soviet State and Religion

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Eren Tasar's book is a historical study which traces the institutionalization of Islam in Soviet Central Asia in the period from World War II to the Brezhnev era and its aftermath. The book focuses on the republics of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,

19 Luehrmann, *Religion in Secular Archives: Soviet Atheism and Historical Knowledge*: 20–24.

20 For further reflections on this topic, see P. Sartori, "'On the Importance of Having a Method': Reading Atheistic Documents on Islamic Revival in 1950s Central Asia." In *Essays in Honour of Devin DeWeese*, eds. J. Eden, A. Frank, E. Tasar (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

21 P. Sartori, "The Tashkent *'Ulamā'* and the Soviet State (1920–1938): A Preliminary Research Note Based on NKVD Documents," in *Patterns of Transformation in and around Uzbekistan*, ed. P. Sartori and T. Trevisani (Reggio Emilia: Diabasis, 2007): 161–184.

and Uzbekistan, and draws on rich source material from the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) archives and the Central Asian *muftiate*, the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (SADUM). In contrast to the anti-religious repression of earlier decades, this period of Soviet policies towards Islam was more pragmatic.

The Soviet approached involved creating institutions for managing Islam, which "nominally fulfilled its ideological need to combat religion, while offering Muslims a space to practice and identify with their faith" (Tasar 2010: 1). More specifically, Tasar focuses on the creation and workings of SADUM, which was founded in 1943 and charged with managing and defining a permitted space for Islam. Emphasizing that the relationship between the Soviet state and its Central Asian subjects was one of "flexibility and accommodation" (Tasar 2010: 3), Tasar argues against the scholarship on Islam in the Soviet Union that has relied mainly on Soviet propaganda and scientific atheist literature and which depicted the relationship between the state and Islam as one of continued opposition. The policy of regulating Islam, Tasar emphasizes, involved control, monitoring, and a continued rhetorical struggle against religion. However, the policy also involved a tacit acknowledgement—and even tolerance—of Islam's presence and cooperation with Islamic religious authorities to create a Soviet Islam that was acceptable to Soviet bureaucrats and local Muslims alike. Tasar argues that, in the end, SADUM came to leave a bigger imprint on Islam in Central Asia than previously acknowledged; "despite the state's pro- found distrust of religion, and its history of persecuting Muslims, a dynamic social and political space emerged for Islamic institutions and ideas to renew themselves in a manner directly shaped by the context of Communism" (Tasar 2010: 373).

Tasar's book is an impressive piece of work that draws on a wealth of source material and contributes to the growing reserve of literature on the subject. Recent takes on the matter revisit and provide nuance to the previously prevalent narratives about religion and Islam during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, complicating Cold War understandings of the relationship between the Soviet state, communism, religion, and the simplistic dichotomies that have often informed such understandings (e.g., East vs. West, tradition vs. modernity, religion vs. communism). Further, Tasar demonstrates that communist states did not merely repress religious practice. Rather, they also sought to negotiate with, accommodate, co-opt, and control religious institutions in ways that persist in how religion is conceptualized and managed in Central Asia and elsewhere in the post-Soviet world. Throughout the book, Tasar discusses evolving relations between state and religious institutions, authorities, and practitioners in Central Asia, and the understandings of Islam in other

areas of the modern Muslim world. By doing this, Tasar convincingly argues that Islam in the Soviet state was not that dissimilar from other parts of the Muslim world, where post-colonial states also sought to objectify and manage Islam in ways that were consequential for how Islam was understood andpracticed.

Tasar acknowledges his study's limitations, and presents it explicitly as "an institutional and political history that cautiously ventures into social history when appropriate", which

> can only partly describe Islam in Central Asia under communism. Like any work dealing with the past, this book misses certain voices and perspectives because of the sources it relies on, while privileging others. Bearing this limitation in mind, *Soviet and Muslim* seeks to tell the remarkable story of Islam's successful institutionalization under rulers who initially set out to destroy it.
>
> Tasar 2010: 14

After reading the book, however, I sit with the question of how "successful" is defined. Was the institutionalization of Islam successful in terms of creating a space, however limited, for scholarly discussion of Islam? Or was the institutionalization successful because what the *muftiate* said and did actually mattered to ordinary practicing Muslims? Tasar begins his book by presenting how Islam was understood and practiced in Central Asia in the 19th and in the beginning of the 20th centuries, pointing out that the diversity of authority figures: prayer leaders, Sufi masters, ritual specialists, and traditional healers of various sorts created immense challenges to the efforts at centralization and institutionalization in the post-World War II period. However, in the remaining parts of the book, diversity recedes to the background of the institutional history, emerging to illustrate the limits of institutional reach and understanding and to show how the evolving institutional frameworks were themselves shaped by local understandings and practices of Islam. For example, stories of ethnic Russians conducting pilgrimages to Muslim shrines (Tasar 2010: 145), or of CARC's representative in Osh smothering holy rocks with black cream, making it impossible for barren women to touch them and rub their eyes (Tasar 2010: 159). Tasar cautiously reflects on the question of whether what the *muftiate* said and did mattered to people—as noted in the example of donations, mosque and community engagement—and suggests that it did (Tasar 2010: 181).

The landscape one encounters in Central Asia today when studying Islam outside of institutional frameworks appears as no less messy than the one

Tasar describes in the beginning of the book, and, at the center of people's stories about how they practiced Islam during Soviet times, are often accounts of how they managed to circumvent restrictions on religious practice (such as shrine visitation). While it may be beyond the scope of this book, I am interested in reading Tasar's reflections on how the *muftiate* mattered to ordinary Muslims—and ordinary atheists for that matter—and, again, what "success" in "Islam's successful institutionalization" means (Tasar 2010: 14).

Institutions: A Lens on Soviet Islam

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I am honored that two scholars whose work stands at the cutting edge of new research on religion in modern Central Asia have given such careful consideration to the arguments and source materials presented in my book, *Soviet and Muslim*. Now that several years have passed since the book's publication, this forum presents a welcome opportunity for the three of us to consider some of the limitations of those arguments and to situate the book within broader trends in the study of Islam and religion in the USSR.

Both scholars comment on the broader implications of the constraints presented by the bureaucratic and institutional sources the book relies upon. Louw notes that the diversity of forms of religious life and genres of Islamic practitioners described in the introduction and Chapter 1 "recedes to the background of the institutional history" for much of the remainder of the book. Sartori comments that "the scope of the scholarly and spiritual authority, which SADUM commanded among Muslim constituencies outside of Tashkent is hardly addressed." These are fair criticisms. They speak to Sartori's accurate characterization of both organizations' output as "a body of literature designed to distort, minimize and conceal the importance of Muslimness." As he rightly notes, this was true not only of CARC's voluminous correspondence, but of SADUM's as well, for the Muftiate had an interest in teleologically painting the Muslim landscape it presided over as destined for eventual control and bureaucratization. The book's sources present additional geographical and chronological constraints that neither scholar mention. For example, its early chapters disproportionately rely on the exceptionally rich Kyrgyz materials

that I luckily managed to access before political upheavals in Bishkek led to these files' classification, while the book's analysis of international affairs largely looks to documentation emanating from Moscow and Tashkent.

What these and other limitations of the sources point to is a basic epistemological constraint: that the relationship between SADUM and CARC, and the role of these two bodies in the hustle-and-bustle of Soviet Central Asian life and politics, can only be understood as a point of intersection or overlap with an infinite number of life trajectories, social and cultural forms, and intellectual trends, each proceeding through its own journey over the book's timeframe. This is true of all institutional histories. *Soviet and Muslim* makes a point of not offering a panoptic vision of Islam. Rather, it advances a framework for making sense of the virtually limitless number of interactions—usually chance ones, for sure—between these two institutions and an assortment of communists, Muslims, and other Soviet people, that are described in the sources.

Does such an admittedly limited exercise offer any value, or historical truth? I would agree with both my reviewers that it does, not only because these institutions have played a more significant role in life than previous scholarship has recognized, but because one such historical truth that is conspicuously lacking in that scholarship is any sensitivity to a certain aesthetic: the existential and ontological challenges and opportunities associated with passing through life within communist institutions and social norms as a Muslim. I suppose we historians practice a certain conceit in presuming to distill the dynamics of past societies to the confines of a distinctive argument which we subsequently have to defend and claim ownership over. Yet these arguments, however sensitively articulated, impose rude boundaries on the decidedly un-linear arc of lived reality. My intention was for *Soviet and Muslim* to gesture to the virtu- ally infinite number of snapshots of the Soviet Muslim *quotidien* that emerge in archival sources in spite of the presumed hegemony of grand institutional narratives. When it comes to reconstructing the flavor of everyday life, I would venture to suggest that the CARC and SADUM archival materials are, in toto, the most comprehensive set of materials we have on Soviet Islam, even com- pared to the rich oral, textual, and ethnographic materials Louw and Sartori have tapped with great sensitivity in their own publications.22

Soviet and Muslim primarily looks at institutions, but some attempt at providing a flavor of the everyday always figured in my mind as a major objective. The number of snippets of religious practice beyond the administrative

22 M.E. Louw, *Everyday Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia* (New York: Routledge, 2007); P. Sartori, "Of Saints, Shrines, and Tractors: Untangling the Meaning of Islam in Soviet Central Asia." *Journal of Islamic Studies* 30/3 (2019): 367–405.

purview of CARC and SADUM I collected in the archives was so large that I was unable to include most of them in the book. One such anecdote illustrates the possibilities for tapping Soviet institutional sources for their hermeneutical possibilities. The story concerns a Dungan "healer" named Arli Yuburov, active in northern Kyrgyzstan in the 1950s, who claimed that, after having a vision, he found himself in possession of the ability to communicate with plants, which divulged to him the cures for cancer, rheumatism, brucellosis, blindness, hypertension, and other ailments. Yuburov registered on CARC's radar because of his immense popularity, which the reporting official attributed in part to the Islamic legend of Luqman Khakim. Every day, the healer saw up to one hundred patients, who would congregate outside his house, with the exception of Fridays, when he made a day trip to the Kyrgyz capital, Frunze, for congregational prayers at the city's registered mosque. (He also refused to see any- body during Ramadan.) After the local government, alarmed by the crowds, issued him a cease and desist order, Yuburov began turning away patients from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other republics, who promptly showed up at the government office demanding "exemption" from the ban because they had traveled so far. After this reference, Yuburov does not appear again in the archives. Since he was in his late forties at the time, it seems likely that he sim- ply reduced the scope of his "practice" to something more modest.23

The gaps in the story, and its openness to interpretation, offer a glimpse into the scope of religious life beyond the narrow corridors of the Muftiate, which joined CARC in castigating practitioners such as Yuburov as "charlatans." This account, and many others like it, stand out not only for the sarcasm dripping from the pages of CARC reports, but for the palpable absence of order. We can only speculate about the information networks that spread word about Yuburov's abilities all the way to Uzbekistan; about the lethargy of local government in taking action; about the assumptions of the traveling patients who showed up at the *raiispolkom* office; and, for that matter, about the authorities' response to their pleas, which goes unrecorded. I want to gesture to the importance of such speculation if the historiography of Soviet Islam is to advance beyond a literal reading of Soviet and Islamic sources. This exercise goes well beyond what an institutional and political history such as *Soviet and Muslim* sets out to achieve, but it forms a critical part of the work that needs to be done with the sources this book relies upon.

As a denizen of this very same religious and communist landscape, the Muftiate cannot be separated from the chaos of religious life, even if its archives attempt to channel that chaos into predictable and orderly frames.

23 KRBMA 2597/1s/45/47 (July 9, 1955).

One cannot inflate SADUM's importance, because even its undeniable peripherality for many Muslims highlights the scope of Islamic practice under communism. Its peripherality proves its importance. The Tashkent Muftiate itself experienced, and was shaped by, the specific examples of social change referenced by Louw and Sartori. One such example is SADUM's rhetorical struggle against "charlatans" and "self-proclaimed" mullas, which reached its apogee in the early 1980s and constituted a response to its failure to restore the level of control it had enjoyed over unregistered mosques in the 1950s. Generational change within the ulama's ranks—detectable already by the mid-1950s—had a profound effect on the organization's theological orientation and goes a long way toward explaining the ease with which it cooperated with the Communist Party under Brezhnev.

Indeed, the work of both Louw and Sartori is pushing historians to begin thinking about communism as a social and economic system that has facilitated certain forms of religiosity. *Soviet and Muslim* invites the reader not to only review religion's meaning, but to also inscribe Soviet atheism and modernization as select aspects of communism, into Muslimness, i.e., Muslims' cosmogony. The book offers a plethora of examples of the ways in which Soviet Muslims could domesticate atheistic practices and the rhetoric of modernization in subtly subversive ways. I take to heart Sartori's suggestion that this insight has implications for the way we think about religion and communism on the broadest plane. If by "religion" we mean not just practices taking place in certain types of buildings or on specific days of the calendar, but, rather, we mean to encapsulate continuities in cosmological understandings of people's place in the world and of manifestations—overt and subtle—of personal and communal spirituality, then perhaps the "religious" and the "communist" are two sides of the same coin. I have in mind not only the changes in religious life that the book discusses (e.g., the growing prominence of "positivistic" and "scripturalist" trends in Islamic intellectual circles) but, no less importantly, the infinite number of continuities—from an exercise as mundane as frying dough to the impressive mass pilgrimages observed at certain sites on Eid al- Adha—shaping the practice of Islam for most Central Asians. To view these continuities as anything other than a daily component of the lived experience of communism—whether through the lens of "resistance," or the well- intentioned but equally flawed rhetoric of "resilience"—is to miss the mark ofactual reality.

The latter point brings me to Louw's well-taken reminder about the accounts of many older Central Asians concerning evasion of official control over religious practice. Louw describes an apparent contradiction: how to reconcile the Muftiate's public prominence and the overwhelming observance

of many forms of Muslim life with the xenophobia toward Islam often exercised by district Party committee staffed by Central Asian communists? For two reasons, I would suggest that labels such as "public" and "clandestine" frequently advanced by scholars (though not by my two colleagues) for describing Brezhnev-era Islamic practices are not helpful for untangling this apparent paradox. First, I can testify that, in my own experience in conducting interviews in the 2000s, the vast majority of Central Asians with vivid memories of practicing (or studying) Islam in the Soviet period were in their fifties or older, meaning that their most relevant recollections primarily related to the years immediately following the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Taking the political climate of Islam present in the early 1980s as representative of Soviet policies toward Islam as a whole is not only misleading for obvious arithmetical reasons; it also ignores the ways in which precedents established in the 1940s and 1950s shaped policies toward religion after Khrushchev's antireligious campaign. Second, when it comes to religion and politics, the line between the public and the private is hardly clear-cut, particularly in a sphere of political life (religion under communism), governed by tacit assumptions and understandings not enshrined in law or administrative practice. Consider the common enough case of a practitioner specializing in incantations to encourage fertility (labeled in Soviet bureaucratic sources as a "shaman" or "sorcerer/ess"). In the unlikely case that such an individual found himself before one of the many "volunteer" driven local committees set up during Khrushchev's antireligious campaign, and in the even less likely case he ended up in a Soviet court, any potential accusations or charges would stem from public health or labor laws—not religion. If we allow for the possibility that many local officials in postwar Central Asia regarded these and other genres of Islamic practitioners as a nuisance on the order of an improperly sanitized food truck, we can begin to understand why, by most accounts, all urban neighborhoods (*kvartal*) and rural settlements boasted the "services" of such individuals, whose identities and addresses were known to everybody, and who appear to have done quite well for themselves under communism. As for the newer, and more racy, manifestations of change in religious life after 1979—the distribution of illegal cassettes with recordings of underground sermons, and the novel phenomenon of itinerant "Wahhabi" preachers—I, at least, remain surprised by how little care those accused of these infractions took to cover their tracks, an outcome highlighting the wide gap separating the political climate of 1980s Uzbekistan from what one felt and breathed there when I lived in Tashkent in the early 2000s. Those Soviet Muslims detained for these crimes seem to have been as surprised to find themselves in prison as

the people arresting them, and, as I note in the book, sentences were light. In any case, such activities are hardly representative of the entire Central Asian Muslim population.

This brings me to a point that neither scholar references: the significance of CARC within the Communist Party. *Soviet and Muslim* is not a history of the Muftiate, but a history of Soviet policies toward Islam after World War II. A large part of the book deals with CARC's institution building initiatives within the Party-state and its interaction with other Soviet bureaucracies. On this basis, the book attempts to say something new about religion and politics in the USSR. To write off the extraordinary accommodation and flexibility displayed toward Islam by CARC bureaucrats in Central Asia as some sort of "exception" to a supposedly rigid antireligious orientation observed in the country as a whole is to miss an important opportunity to assess whether the Soviet Union, for the bulk of its history, really lived up to its reputation for hostility toward religion. Historians need not write the Party's atheistic mission off entirely in order to reach a more nuanced and sober assessment of the antireligious agenda, and to ask whether, in the postwar decades, this agenda really amounted to a "struggle" in any meaningful sense of the word. I have in mind a level of analysis more sociological than the banal exercise of labeling the USSR as "tolerant" toward Islam: CARC's gradual inclusion, starting in the 1960s, into a community of atheistic scholarship and activism transcending the policymaking and academic establishments, even as, within the Islamic sphere, there crystallized in parallel a community of teaching and scholarship encompassing various *hujra*s and SADUM's educational establishments, that further transcended the registered/unregistered divide. This finding leads me to believe that in the coming years, the scholarship on religion in the USSR will reveal the extent to which "religious" and "antireligious" institutions and personnel interacted with and reinforced one another, especially under Late Socialism. Whether this process of interaction and cross-fertilization produced something distinctly Soviet when compared to other communist and authoritarian states, is for future scholars to decide.