

Book Review

New Russian Perspectives on Central Asia

Islam in Central Asia, by Ludmila R. Polonskaia and A. V. Malashenko.
Reading, U.K.: Ithaca Press, 1994. Pp.177. ISBN: 086-372-1826.

The book under review is written by leading experts on Islam from Moscow Vostokovedeniya Institute (Institute of Oriental Studies). The authors have tried to present a comprehensive picture of Islam in Central Asia from an historical perspective. They also focus on modern times and post-Soviet era. The book reflects Russian rediscovery of Islam in Central Asia and development of modern discussion on Islam with no reference to outside sources.

In evaluating the works on Islamic awakening in Central Asia by Muscovite experts, it is essential to keep in mind that the 19th century classical Russian studies of Islam, which revolved around spiritual aspects of Islam, were replaced in the early 20th century by the materialistic world view of the then Soviet Union. The former Soviet investigations of Islam in Central Asia were largely ethnographic, based on studies of the life of the Muslims rather than on analyses of the teachings of the Qur'ān and *sunnah*.

The first two chapters describe how Islam spread in Mā-Warā' al-Nahr (old name of Central Asia), and evaluate the extent to which it was incorporated into the life of locals, settlers, as well as that of nomads. While the authors admire the great achievements of Muslim society in the Medieval time, they do not appear to realize that Islam is a complete way of life, and not just one of the institutions of society. They point out that the nomads adopted Islam as their main religion between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries (p.32).

Thoroughly examining Russian policy with regard to Islam, the authors develop the thesis that Russian Czars started taking interest in Central Asia long before the 19th century. The evidence they present shows that Russian penetration of Central Asia had already started during

the reign of Peter the Great (1689-1725). Earlier official Soviet studies contended that Russian interest in Central Asia began only in the 19th century, mainly to oppose possible British colonization of the area.

Unlike some former Soviet historians who insist that the Central Asians willingly accepted "protection by Russian Empire," the authors of *Islam in Central Asia* accept that the local people resisted the Soviet domination, although some nomadic tribes asked for the protection of Russia to escape colonization by Kokand Khaganate and Jungar Khaganate. Russian policy towards Muslims was quite consistent. The Czarist state attempted to take control of the political and social life of the Central Asian Muslim community and tried its best to implement a new world view through educational institutions.

The authors carefully described the *Jadīdi* movements in Russian Muslim lands. They have shown that Jadīdists had direct confrontation with the "conservative wing of the 'ulamā'" (p.55) during the second half of the 19th century. They identified two types of reformers in the Muslim society of Russia: one group of reformers fought for the secularization of Muslim society, while the other group adhered to the "religious world view," though both of them criticized the dogmatic 'ulamā' and religious fanaticism. Chokan Velikhanov (1835-1865) is a distinguished representative of the first group. The second group is represented by Abunaer al-Qursavī and al-Marjanī, and followed by the Jadidism movement. A major debate among the conservative thinkers and reformers revolved around the educational system. These discussions stirred up political activity in the Muslim community of Russia, giving rise to various political movements during the pre-Revolutionary period.

Chapter 3 analyses the success of Soviet policy in Central Asia. Compared to the earlier Soviet approach which considered the Bolshevik's October Revolution of 1917 a political milestone, the authors argue that the Liberal-Democratic revolution of February 1917 had the greatest impact on the political activities of all parties, including the Bolshevik party. Young democratic leaders and reformers of Central Asia chose the Bolsheviks as allies because only the Bolsheviks accepted the role of Islam in national affairs. The Communist parties then included Muslims—even the 'ulamā' (p.89), and tolerated the religious practices of party members. Once they were firmly in power, the Bolsheviks launched Stalin's policy of "Great Changes," trying to dismantle Islamic structures and force atheism on Muslims. However, the authors argue that even under the Communist regime, Islam survived in Central Asia (the so-called "underground Islam," p.101) and Muslims adapted themselves to the new situation without losing their Islamic identity. Under the influence of Islamic Socialism of Egyptian President Gamal A.

Nasser, "Central Asian 'Ulamā' put forward their own theory regarding modernization of Islam" (p.98).

Chapter 4, entitled "The First Steps of Islamic Renaissance," describes the political situation of the 1980s and the Islamic resurgence in the region. Despite reprisals and persecution, the contemporary Islamic thrust remains steadfast in its objectives: to revive classical Muslim culture, to re-educate Muslims about their history and religion, and to reindulcate moral values (p.111). The authors applaud the contributions of Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and some others in the distribution of Qur'ān and books on Islamic teachings, financial assistance in rebuilding mosques, and in helping to restore links with the Muslim world.

The last two chapters analyse the relationships among Muslim republics, and their relationship with the outside world including Russia. After a detailed discussion of political developments in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the authors conclude that there is no possibility of Muslims forging a "joint fundamentalist block," nor the Islamic political parties in the region would be uniting and playing a major role in Central Asia.

On the contrary, they argue that Russia remains a guarantor of stability, and that the Central Asian politicians (both ruling elite and opposition) have accepted this fact. The Central Asian elites subscribe to "the process of modernization of traditional society after the European fashion, its secularization and gradual renunciation of traditional standards of behaviour at every social level in politics" (p.150). Most probably, the authors believe that the Muslim world has no influence in Central Asia and hence they do not mention Tehran's involvement in Central Asian politics. They are also silent on the role of Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Islam in Central Asia is the latest and the most comprehensive Russian analysis and evaluation of Islamic resurgence in former Soviet Central Asia. It is largely based on secondary sources of Muscovite origin, to the total neglect of contributions made even by their colleagues from other parts of Russia and Central Asia. This accounts for a poor bibliography which is also fraught with inconsistency in style. Yet, it may be recommended as a useful introduction to the cultural, historical and political development of contemporary Central Asia.

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