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Morozova, Irina

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The Netherlands  
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# Islam and Politics of Late Socialism in Central Asia\*

*Irina Morozova*

There have been considerable publications examining how the philosophy of religion, and Islam in particular, has developed in connection to political trajectories in the twentieth century and how we, as scholars, understand the dynamics of modern and contemporary religious politics. Following the post-modernist revision of construction of social knowledge, many authors reflected upon our usage of concepts of politics and religion. This article does not pursue a comprehensive review of this literature, but rather positions the existing debate on Islam in Soviet Central Asia within the broader discussion and appropates certain hypotheses on the available historical data. The vision of the interconnectivity in colonial and post-colonial history<sup>1</sup> and the nuanced approach of *histoire croisée*<sup>2</sup> yet exist in ambivalent form in the field of Central Asian studies. This article aims to contribute to the development of studies on Islam in relation to late socialism by applying certain methodology offered by the above-mentioned scholarly concepts.

The communists' relation to religion and religious activists should be ultimately distinguished from the generally pronounced communist declaration of religion as opiate for people. Throughout the twentieth century not only political preconditions and social disarray determined the alliances between communists and representatives of religious elites at different levels (albeit in most cases temporal), but more often the complex interplay of identities and personal involvement of the communists into communal life fostered these pacts. Within the shared historical space of the twentieth century various groups and individuals in Central Asia allied not solely to the Western/Soviet communists for political gains, but saw the ideology of communism as grounds to signify their activities and create new social space inside their communities and beyond. This article focuses on institutions and people's loyalties that developed beyond the official public anti-religious propaganda in Central Asia (namely Turkmenistan, Tajikistan,

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<sup>1</sup> P. van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters. Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton and Oxford 2001).

<sup>2</sup> M. Werner and B. Zimmermann, 'Beyond Comparison: Histoire croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity', *History and Theory* 45 (2006) 30-50.

Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and with a special focus on Kazakhstan) within the last decade of the USSR's existence and dwells upon theological and ideological relations between communism and Islam in the way they were understood and interpreted by the followers of these teachings.

It has been noted by many scholars that Soviet secularism and Islamic reformism have shared not only a similar political platform of sharp anti-capitalist protest with its strategy and tactics of social mobilization, but certain ideological ground as well. For instance, the rationalist concepts of religiosity. While communism, as a genuinely Western ideology, took stimulus in European Enlightenment with its missionary idea, the reformist trends of Islam also accented on bringing light to the darkness of the world. The general notion about principle antagonisms between communism as a universal and futuristic concept and Islamic reformism as a particularistic one with its reference to the golden past still prevails. Nevertheless, while certain reformist trends have proved to be extremely particularistic, others accept the quest for individual interpretation of the sacred texts and certain socio-cultural innovations of the contemporary Western civilization and claim in the same way as the communists did (with a significant accent on field work) that they have the true vision of the progressive, forward-looking society.<sup>3</sup>

Some researchers (particularly Sovietologists) suggested that political Islam of the end of the 1970s until the beginning of the 1980s borrowed a lot from and was adulterated by totalitarian socialism to the extent that it could free itself from the formerly established alliance with communism and expose the evils of the former in the same way as the evils of capitalism. At present, the reformist Islamic organizations that operate on the territory of Central Asia, as for instance Hizb ut-Tahrir, (an Islamic party, which in its political programme aims at establishing Caliphate; so far its establishments are prohibited in some countries of Central Asia, as for instance in Uzbekistan) are in clear opposition to communist ideas and practices.<sup>4</sup> Their ideologists point out that after the disintegration of the Soviet Union they

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<sup>3</sup> M. el-Kadhafi (Gaddafi), *Le Livre Vert I* (Paris 1976) 20. Cited by: G. G. Imart, *Islamic and Slavic Fundamentalisms: Foes or Allies? (The Turkestanian reagent)* (Bloomington 1987) 31.

<sup>4</sup> Programme by the political party Hizb ut-Tahrir, translated from English into Russian by A. A. Knyazev. A. A. Knyazev, *Afganskii konflikt i radikal'nyi Islam v Tsentral'noi Azii. Sbornik materialov i dokumentov* [Afghan conflict and radical Islam in Central Asia] (Bishkek 2001) 101.

see no threat in communism any longer, and the activities of the present communist parties in Muslim countries have no effect.<sup>5</sup>

Within this line the Hizb ut-Tahrir emphasis on the widespread nostalgia for the Soviet Union in Central Asia could be seen not solely as a tactical approach to framing social discontent,<sup>6</sup> but something deeper. The concern about the USSR's legacy is noticeable in the speeches of Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov: 'the communist ideology – which lacks spirituality, is fanatical and anti-national in character – contributed greatly to the formation of the prerequisites for religious fundamentalism within post-Soviet space'.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the official Tashkent policies against reformist Islam could be better understood within the ongoing competition for the symbols and legacy of the socialist past.

### **Central Asian Islam and communism in relation to nation-state prior to the Second World War**

Communism and Islam have been interconnected, above all, by modern nationalism. The notions of national and ethnic have been usurped or shared by the followers of both teachings. The stages of the history of Islam in Soviet Central Asia can be determined through the changes of its politics and interpretations of the idea of nation-state.<sup>8</sup>

At the start of the short twentieth century, which next to the wide spread of communism also became recognized as the era of Asiatic Renaissance, the characteristic feature of the views expressed by practically

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<sup>5</sup> *Concepts of Hizb ut-Tahrir* (London, Khilafah publication) 74. Accessed via [http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/PDF/EN/en\\_books\\_pdf/Concepts.pdf](http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org/PDF/EN/en_books_pdf/Concepts.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> E. Karagiannis, 'Political Islam in Uzbekistan. Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami' in: T. Abbas ed., *Islam and Education. Major Themes in Education. Vol. II. Education in Eastern Europe, Central Eurasia, South Asia and South East Asia* (London and New York 2011) 190-192.

<sup>7</sup> I. Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century* (London 1997) 22.

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance: A. Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley 1998); M. Buttino, 'Politics and Social Conflict during a Famine: Turkestan immediately after the Revolution' in: M. Buttino ed., *Collapsing Empire: Underdevelopment, Ethnic Conflicts and Nationalism in the Soviet Union* (Milan 1993); A. Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton 2004); A. Haugen, *The Establishment of National republics in Soviet Central Asia* (Basingstoke 2003); D. T. Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY 2004).

all well-known Asian intellectuals was the idea of framing their social protest in nationalist discourse. Religious disputes were linked to nationalism, while the latter was often interpreted through the prism of communist rhetoric.

The authors of Muslim reformism within the Russian Empire were educated in Western style by local intellectuals, who therefore unavoidably embedded the discourse on Russia's unique historical path in their social programmes. On its part, Russia's imperial administration had to re-establish collegial relations with religious elites in the Muslim parts of the Empire in order to build a stronger alliance against domestic (Bolshevist) and external (pan-Turkish, pan-Islamic and Ottoman) threats. The imperial support for certain reformist concepts by Muslim intellectuals, predominantly Tatar, came in exchange for political and ideological loyalty and resulted in the spread of Europeanized Islamic education among Muslims of Central Asia (noticeable, for instance, in the establishment and success of *mektebs*, new method schools of Islamic education).

Within the Russian Empire, *inorodtsy* (non-Russian nationalities) had only limited opportunities for political careers. At the same time, they could express their quests for modern identity through science and research up to the moment, when the spread of communist ideology presented them new ways to frame their social protest.<sup>9</sup> Religious reformism in Asian and Oriental societies inspired by the Bolshevik revolution in St. Petersburg, took peculiar forms via activities of Russia's Muslim *intelligentsia*. Some scholars argue that the programmes of Bolsheviks and Islamic reformers (*Jadids*) overlapped considerably, and differed fundamentally only in the attitude towards religion.<sup>10</sup> Other scholars have proved in a detailed record on how the Muslims allied with Bolsheviks that the attitude to religion was not the main focus of their disputes, at least at the most crucial first stages of the revolution.<sup>11</sup> However, this discussion in historiography is unlikely to

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<sup>9</sup> See: I. Morozova, 'Comparative Historical Analysis of Pan-Asiatic Social Movements in Central and Inner Asia. Z.V. Togan and E.D. Rinchino', *Journal of Central Asian Studies* VII.2 (2003) 2-19.

<sup>10</sup> A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley and London 2007) 65-71.

<sup>11</sup> S. M. Iskhakov, *Rossiiskie Musul'mane i Revoliutsiya (Vesna 1917 – leto 1918) [Russian Muslims and Revolution (Spring 1917/Summer 1918)]* (Moscow, Izdatel'stvo 'Sotsial'no-politicheskaya MYSL', 2004).

be resolved before we understand how Islam was practised and influenced by wider sections of the population.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, in Central Asia, Islam constituted an integral part of social life and politics. The indivisibility of religion and politics/state (*din wa-dawla*), always emphasized in Islamic intellectual tradition,<sup>12</sup> was not within the scope of realization and interests of the communists in the 1910-20s. In general, the Bolsheviks viewed religion as just one of the political factors and contra-ideology. However, it became clear rather soon to the communist agents in the field (and via their reports to the Soviet policy-makers) that Asian religious communities required a different approach than the Orthodox Christian Church and any rapid assault upon the religion in Asia would only make the population hostile against the Soviet and revolutionary power.

The rhetoric of the holy alliance of the 1920-30s between religious leaders and communists was grounded on the idea of national liberation. The alliance existed in between two world wars, presenting new opportunities for both religious elites and communists to develop their ideologies, and to their followers to gain a momentum and claim the positions of power. In Soviet Central Asia, particularly in the second part of the 1930s, the Islamic institutions and groups never totally disappeared, despite the official anti-religious campaigns and repressions. Regardless of the general speculative ideological statement on religion as an opiate of the masses, the communists throughout different periods of Soviet history had sought alliances with Muslims. After WWII the pacts became less easily recognised, since the interconnectivity between communists and Muslims was already so complex that no direct borderline could have been drawn.

### **Institutionalization of the Soviet Muslims: the politics of SADUM**

In the 1940s a principal change occurred among Central Asian intellectual and religious elites at republican and municipal levels, which above all

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<sup>12</sup> The discourse on the absence of the distinction between religion and politics in Islam has been present in Western, Soviet and other historiographies. See, for instance: D.F. Eickelman and J. Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton 1996) 46-67. On modern theories of social knowledge within Islamic tradition see: A. S. Moussalli, 'Islamism: modernisation of Islam or Islamisation of knowledge' in: R. Meijer ed., *Cosmopolitanism, Identity and Authenticity in the Middle East* (Surrey 1999) 87-101.

redefined their relation vis-à-vis Moscow. Soon after the beginning of WWII the Soviet leaders realised the importance of raising patriotic feelings among the people and they started to address ethnic and religious groups, diasporas, and wider sections of the population by calling them for a fight against fascism under the banner of Islam and national awakening. The communist leaders in Moscow strictly adhered to the policy of tight party control over the population and in particular those who might have had contacts with foreigners. At the same time, the attempts to supervise the revolutionary work among the oppositional groups in the neighbouring countries, especially Iran and Afghanistan, intensified during and after the war. As more Asian leaders decided to ally with the victorious USSR and a new wave of communist parties' activities coincided with the post-war decolonization process, Soviet Muslims and Central Asian intellectuals had the intention to transnationalise and build up new networks at international levels. They used the USSR's victory and had an ambitious goal to guide post-war ideological trends in the Orient and Asia. The repressive policy of Stalin on one side and the establishment of the bi-polar world system on the other did not bring those ideas to full realization, but nevertheless led to a principle change of the Soviet religious elites' positions domestically and internationally.

In 1943, the Central Asian Muslims received an opportunity to institutionalise within the newly established Spiritual Directory of the Muslims of Central Asia and Kazakhstan (most commonly known and referred to in the Russian abbreviation as SADUM). SADUM was not a genuinely Soviet invention; its prototypes can be traced back to Russia's imperial history, when similar institutions had been established under Catherine II to reign over the Muslim population of the Russian Empire. Under the Soviets, local intellectuals and *ulama* (Muslim scholars) learned to adopt a secular rhetoric in the public sphere after the political campaigns and repressions of the 1930s and got a better chance to consolidate and form a new strata of state-appointed Muslims. By the time SADUM was re-established, the survived ulama were dispersed in the rural landscape. So far, having their positions legalised and secured by direct linking to party organs, the leaders of SADUM received political means to influence and shape public spiritual and ideological life through official channels and build new elite networks of socialist Muslims.

In the Soviet Union, the official Muslims managed to become strong competitors for the control of the institutions and interpretation of

symbols.<sup>13</sup> The journal *Muslims of the Soviet East*, which was published in Tashkent in a few Western and Oriental languages since 1968 and became a platform for promoting official discourses on Islam, elaborated in various forms that the idea of establishing SADUM belonged not to Stalin, but to the Muslims themselves.<sup>14</sup> Another telling example of instrumentalisation of state institutions to launch a reform within Islam were the *fatwa's* (authorised opinion on Islamic law by a representative of ulama) issued by SADUM. SADUM performed, as argued by some scholars, in an authoritarian way. The way, in which the *fatwa's* were imposed upon the believers, was quite similar to how the Soviet government issued decrees.<sup>15</sup> Next to this authoritarianism (which, in fact, was not solely a Soviet invention), the *fatwa's* became known for their reformist content.

The intensified contacts between the ulama of Soviet Central Asia and the foreign Orient became characteristic for the period of Khrushchev's Thaw. The ritual pilgrimage (*hadj*) to Mecca was regularly performed; and the new trends that had been appearing within Islamic tradition worldwide started penetrating Central Asia. Some religious leaders of SADUM were under great influence of Islamic reformism; other more conservative Sunni, did not welcome those trends. Remarkably, the two poles have not been ultimately antagonistic to each other. Their adherents, interconnected via numerous networks, including military, are also known to have claimed a Sufi identity.<sup>16</sup> In perestroika times, particularly at the end of the 1980s, the Soviet Muslims were already enrolled in Islamic educational programmes in the Sunni Muslim countries, the regimes of which were friendly to Kremlin (such as Libya, Syria, Egypt, Jordan and others). The Islamic educational literature pieces published in Kazakhstan at the beginning of the 1990s bear

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<sup>13</sup> On these two foci of Muslim politics see: Eickelman and Piscatori, *Muslim Politics*, 5-16.

<sup>14</sup> *Musul'mane Sovetskogo Vostoka* [Muslims of the Soviet East] 4 (Tashkent 1976) 2. See also: C. Poujol, 'Islam in post-Soviet Central Asia: Democracy Versus Justice?' in: I. Morozova ed., *Towards Social Stability and Democratic Governance in Central Eurasia. Challenges to Regional Security* (Amsterdam 2005) 52.

<sup>15</sup> B. Babadjanov, 'From Colonization to Bolshevization: Some Political and Legislative Aspects of Molding a "Soviet Islam" in Central Asia' in: W. Johnson, I. Popova ed., *Central Asian Law: An Historical Overview, Journal of Asian Legal History* (2004) 168.

<sup>16</sup> O. Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (New York 2000) 144.

witness to very active contacts between the Muslims of the Soviet Central Asian Republics and the neighbouring Orient in the 1980s.<sup>17</sup>

The reformist Islam became known to the wider public and took stimulus from this new ground, especially in urban areas. It was actively propagated from the top, as the high echelons of official Muslim administrations happened to be under great influence of reformist ideologies. As early as 1952 one of the most famous leaders of SADUM, *mufti* Ziyavuddin Babakhan, attempted to reform Islam and purify it from the false practices of Sufism<sup>18</sup> that dared to interpret Qur'an and the Hadith.<sup>19</sup>

The competition among different trends in Islam, as well as the dialectics of relationships between ecclesiastic authorities and believers, did not allow the Soviet fatwa's to acquire any undisputable scriptural authority. Particularly since the 1960s they were not unanimously followed or precisely exercised by the believers. The ulama, of whom some representatives were more educated in Islamic theology than SADUM members, created channels to theologially debate the content of the fatwa's through. Since perestroika they received an opportunity to express their position publicly, which they did vigorously,<sup>20</sup> fighting to have more influence on the believers. Thus, the so-called revival of Islam in the beginning of the 1990s did not appear on an empty ground and did not fill any imagined vacuum, but paralleled the transformation of Central Asian societies in the period of late socialism.

The time of Gorbachev's perestroika was absolutely unique, as no religious institution had the power to claim full monopoly over communal spiritual life. Unfortunately, since the archive of the Tashkent-based SADUM is closed to the researcher, we can only presuppose what kind of complex competition within this organization took place. The Soviet SADUM began disintegrating and existed in its original establishment until 1988. At the beginning of the 1990s, the rulers of the newly independent

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<sup>17</sup> A. J. Frank, *Popular Islamic Literature in Kazakhstan. An Annotated Bibliography* (Hyattsville, MD 2007).

<sup>18</sup> For a comprehensive record on the role of Sufism in present Central Asian societies see: B. G. Privatsky, *Muslim Turkistan. Kazakh Religion and Collective Memory* (Richmond 2001).

<sup>19</sup> Babadjanov, 'From Colonization to Bolshevization', 163.

<sup>20</sup> See: B. Babadjanov, 'The Muslim Spiritual Directorate of Central Asia (SADUM): Background and Consequences of Collapse' in: M. B. Olcott and A. Malashenko ed., *Multi-Dimensional Borders of Central Asia* (Moscow 2000).

Central Asian Republics had to find a way to stay in power and strengthen their legitimacy via re-establishing relations with religious groups. The discourse on Islam became once again (as had happened in regional history of modern times before) intertwined with the story of national awakening and rediscovering historical roots. The rhetoric on Islam and nation was used by certain political elites, whom in their anticipation of reform, were urgently searching for ideological ground and a new intellectual paradigm. First, the appellation to history and the call for re-conceptualizing history came from the top, produced by the party propaganda departments, and seemed to fit within the Soviet secularisation project. A lot of decrees by Republican governments on reconstruction of national historical monuments were issued in this period.

It has been argued that secular politicians, but not the SADUM leaders, made key decisions on nationalization and ethnicisation of post-socialist Islam at the beginning of the 1990s.<sup>21</sup> However, the division of SADUM into smaller republic-centred bodies could have never happened without the Muslim leaders seeing a momentum to signify their roles as transmitters of true Islamic tradition within their national Republics. By January 1990 Kazakhstan, for instance, already had its own *muftiate*, the Religious Board of Kazakhstani Muslims, based in Almaty. As was shown by Allan Frank, the Board followed reformist trends in theological orientation.<sup>22</sup> Also, research by Bahtiyar Babadjanov shows that already in the early 1990s the independent Uzbekistani SADUM had to upgrade the former Soviet SADUM's policies towards Sufi practices and demonstrated more tolerance to people's religion.<sup>23</sup> The tendency to abandon the Soviet negative attitudes towards the quasi-religious superstitions of Sufi rites became noticeable in other Central Asian Republics as well: as shown by Frank, many prayer books in great numbers available in Kazakhstan (even if published in Uzbekistan) bear direct Sufi connections.<sup>24</sup> The official Islam ideologists in Central Asian countries have deviated from propagating purity of Islamic practices in favour of people's Islamic rites.

Nevertheless, the main role in promoting the vision of Islam and nation unity belongs to the ruling elite. The Kazakhstani government

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<sup>21</sup> Babadjanov, 'The Muslim Spiritual Directorate', 63-66.

<sup>22</sup> Frank, *Popular Islamic Literature*, xviii.

<sup>23</sup> Babadjanov, 'From Colonization to Bolshevization', 164.

<sup>24</sup> Umrzoq hoji Zokirjon o'g'li and E. Yusupov ed., *Qualities that Rest on Prayers* (Tashkent 2004). Cited by Frank, *Popular Islamic Literature*, 31-33.

affirmably attempted to nationalize the whole spectrum of popular Islam rather than letting religious organizations and reformist trends from abroad (be it Christian or Muslim) operate successfully in the country. For example, worshipping the holy places (*mazar*) acquired new meaning with the governmental efforts to bring these places under the protection of the state (like in Uzbekistan). These policies reflect the continuity of the perestroika search for national heritage and claim to state protection over national monuments. The way this heritage is found, understood, conceptualized and taught at school is a reflection of a complex process of social transformation, rivalry for resources, as well as intense political competition.

When nowadays the representatives of influential ulama create their stories of the late 1980s epochal turn, they create their story about the missionary role they played to unite Central Asian Muslims. Thus, the first mufti of the independent Uzbekistani SADUM Muhammad-Sodiq Muhammad-Yusuf has written that he, as well as other educated Muslim intellectuals in Central Asia, fought against the schism in Islam that became dangerously sharp at times of perestroika.<sup>25</sup>

### **Central Asian Islam in transregional perspective: the impact of new international trends**

In the 1920s Bolsheviks attempted to adjust reformist trends within Islam to the universalistic and modernistic communist ideology. Since the 1960s communism, already at the retro-gradual stage, was adjusted to Islam, which is reflected, above all, in the politics of central Soviet authorities towards Muslim Republics. The Soviet Muslims did not question the superiority of socialism as state system, but they distinctly preferred to interpret socialism as a sort of secondary ideology that had originated from the teachings of the

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<sup>25</sup> Muhammad-Sodiq Muhammad-Yusuf, *Ikhtiloflar haqida* [On Conflicts]. Cited by B. Babadjanov, 'Debates over Islam in Contemporary Uzbekistan: A View from Within' in: S.A. Dudoignon ed., *Devout Societies vs. Impious States? Transmitting Islamic Learning in Russia, Central Asia and China, through the Twentieth Century* Islamkundliche Untersuchungen 258 (Berlin 2004) 40-48.

Prophet.<sup>26</sup> For a long time this discourse had been developing on the pages of the journal *Muslims of the Soviet East*'

At the same time, the Soviet Muslim elite was aware of the literature on the new reformist trends within Islam actively published in the 1970s until the beginning of the 1980s in foreign Muslim countries. They probably read Mustafa as-Sibai, who condemned communism as a teaching that continuously provoked the bloody class struggle and political purges and argued that only Islam could claim to be truly socialist (meaning fair) due to its divine nature.<sup>27</sup> They might have also read one of the theoreticians of the Muslim Brothers, Sayyid Qutb, who categorically juxtaposed Islam to socialism as the divine order to the order established by humans, whom in their turn are imperfect and need guidance.<sup>28</sup> The general tendency in relations of Islam to communism as an ideology and socialism as a social system was moving drastically away from the holy alliance of the 1920-30s to polarization. Muslim activists and intellectuals were adjusting their teachings to communist ideology, to a more affirmative concept of Muslim religious politics. Such a relocation of positions within the world of Islam in Central Asia became possible due to the Cold War and the USSR's relations to the Third World Muslim countries and the Soviet's active communications to reformist Islamists in the Middle East and Northern Africa during Brezhnev and Gorbachev times.

The late 1970-80s were marked by a new wave of writings on religious and communist ideologies. Particularly writers from Asia and the Orient highlighted comparisons of religious ideologies and communism, finding similarities in the Muslims' and communists' attitudes towards the holy book (Qu'ran and Lenin's writings (Lenin's Hadiths)) and the consequent interpretations and reinterpretations of these sacred texts.<sup>29</sup> Other similarities, like rejection of the Rule of Law (the secular systems of

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<sup>26</sup> H. Bräker, 'Die sowjetische Politik gegenüber dem Islam' in: A. Kappeler, G. Simon and G. Brunner, *Die Muslime in der Sowjetunion und in Jugoslawien. Identität, Politik, Widerstand* (Köln 1989) 143.

<sup>27</sup> As-Sibai Mustafa, *Socialism of Islam* (Damascus 1959) Cited by: A. A. Ignatenko, *Halify bez Halifata. Islamskie nepravitel'stvennyye religiozno-politicheskie organizatsii na Blizhnem Vostoke. Istorija, ideologija, deyatelnost'* [Caliphs without Caliphate. Islamic non-governmental religious-political organizations in the Middle East. History, ideology, activity] (Moscow 1988) 130-132.

<sup>28</sup> Sayyid Qutb, *Social fairness in Islam*. Cited by: Ignatenko, *Halify bez Halifata*, 133.

<sup>29</sup> V. S. Naipaul, *Among the Believers* (London 1981).

legislation) and a call for active position and struggle against imperialism and colonialism have been pointed out.<sup>30</sup> A special reading of historical events based on loyalty a priori to (Islamic or communist) dogmas and axioms and a strong belief that the Prophet and Lenin came to this world to eliminate slavery and exploitation were dwelled upon as characteristic for the ideologies of Islam and communism.<sup>31</sup> This literature marked a new stage of Asian scholars' (including religious scholars) reflections upon their previous and contemporary relations to communism and suggested that communism and Islam were not two opposing, but rather competing ideologies. It was only the USSR's dissolution that temporarily blurred these discussions.

As a result of the Soviet engagement in Afghanistan even the former allies tended to associate the Soviet Union and socialist system with a wrong ideology and another adversary to the Muslim society socio-political system. These discussions were well known and understood by the top Soviet Muslim administration. As rightfully noticed by Catherine Poujol, the Western scholars of Central Asian Islam somehow overlooked those trends within the Soviet Islam.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, they did not pass completely unnoticed by intelligence organizations, which, on their side, were often not well informed and ill- or misinterpreted many events, adding to the bottomless well of the Cold War ideological myths.<sup>33</sup>

Since the beginning of the 1990s and up until now reformist trends within Islam and democratic ideology are equally not accepted and seen as a threat (despite the de jure proclamation of Central Asian Republics as democratic states) to the former Central Asian *nomenklatura* and conservative SADUM leaders. This reflects in the current nation-centric historiographies of Central Asian Republics: for example, the Jadid movement has been highlighted as a unique national Islamic reformist movement in Central Asia. Vanished into the past, Jadidism does not appear threatening at present, on the contrary, as the nationalist character of

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<sup>30</sup> Naipaul, *Among the Believers*, 157, 78, 109, 149.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, 32, 219, 134-135.

<sup>32</sup> Poujol, 'Islam in Post-Soviet Central Asia'.

<sup>33</sup> See, for instance: Imart, *Islamic and Slavic Fundamentalism*.

Jadids is emphasized (particularly in Uzbekistan), the reminiscences of Jadidism serve for the legitimacy of the ruling political elite.<sup>34</sup>

### **Beyond the official institutions**

The late perestroika time was characterised by free competition among various religious groups and ideologies. That was the time of real pluralism on the conceptions of what true Muslims identity was and what constituted correct Muslim behaviour. In the 1980s, as in the 1920s, the most bizarre ideas on what religion meant for an individual and society occurred. Discussions about the relation of religious philosophy to the achievements of modern science reappeared. Certain political concepts like pan-Islamism also surfaced.

The non-official discourse on Islam and resistance to fatwa's intensified the awareness of the believers about their religious loyalties. In the 1980s, the generation of urban Central Asian Muslims educated in the secular tradition painfully reflected upon their lack of knowledge about their past, tradition, and religion. The section 'Letters by the readers' in republican newspapers and journals of perestroika times reveals those moods very vividly. The strong demand for knowledge and guidelines on Islamic faith resulted in mass publications of primers and other works addressing the basics of Islamic doctrine and practice, treaties outlining Sunni dogma, as well as translations of original Wahhabi texts by Saudi theologians. As noted by Frank, in the 1980s and early 1990s many of those works constituted a sort of secularly oriented guide to Islam,<sup>35</sup> targeted at secular Kazakhstani seeking trustworthy information on the foundation of Islamic faith. The eruption of interpretations of Islam, supported and promoted by various parties, became particularly sharp in Uzbekistan, where calls for the establishment of a Caliphate were pronounced.

The Soviet state politics in relation to Islam in Central Asia created one more paradox: by supporting the existence of certain official forms of religious practice to a certain degree, it turned many people against that religious officialdom. By limiting the scope of religious authority, the Soviet

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<sup>34</sup> Rediscovering Jadidism has been especially exemplary in Uzbekistan. See, for instance: S. Agyamhodyhaev, *Turkiston Mubtorlari* [Turkistan Autonomy] (Tashkent 1996).

<sup>35</sup> Frank, *Popular Islamic Literature*, 39.

policy helped those religious practitioners who had been marginalized and not fully represented in public life before, as for instance female religious figures.<sup>36</sup> Under the slogan of the revival of traditions, many people got an opportunity to claim a part of religious authority. The whole discussion about tradition, pre-Islamic folk beliefs and Islam of the late 1980s-beginning of the 1990s reflected the new relocation of positions and new regrouping for people who wished to play an active role in the society at local, translocal, republican and transregional levels.

In the situation of numerous public discussions and interpretations of religion and tradition and the loss of state supranational ideological authority (of the communist party) the role of local communal spiritual leaders became particularly unique. Even before perestroika there was restriction, but no tough control over religious communal activities, especially since the party members and state officials turned into practicing Muslims, when participating in celebrations of household life cycle rituals (birth, marriage and mourning feasts). Since the 1960s it became even possible, albeit unofficially, to run a *maktab* in one's house. The actual existence of unofficial Sufi brotherhoods (*tariqas*), parallel *mullahs* (a cleric in a local mosque educated in Islamic theology) in *kollehozes* (collective farms),<sup>37</sup> as well as self-appointed mullahs and *imams* was not unnoticed, but tolerated by the Soviet authorities, as long as communist party members responsible for decision-making were involved in the social life of their communities, which was largely centred to Islamic rites. In the second part of the 1980s, in particular after 1987, when religious ceremonies became officially recognized and allowed by the Soviet state, religious activities went beyond any centralized control due to their great amounts, variety of forms and numbers of people involved. Lots of mosques and *madrases* began to appear.

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<sup>36</sup> See: H. Fathi, 'Gender, Islam, and Social Change in Uzbekistan' in: Abbas, *Islam and Education*, 157-173.

<sup>37</sup> Roy, *The New Central Asia*, 152.



Ill. 1: The new central mosque in Astana. Picture taken by Irina Morozova, July 2011.



Ill. 2: The visit of a newly married couple to the new central mosque of Astana: a bizarre combination of Muslim and secular Soviet cults. Picture taken by Irina Morozova, July 2011.

The entrepreneurial self-appointed spiritual leaders provided their disoriented fellow-citizens with ideological and social orientation, and formed the special strata of post-socialist popular religious and spiritual

activists. These strata of popular religion and occultism practitioners grew during the first years of independence, and won a certain niche in society and demonstrated amazing continuity by reproducing new generations of commercial spiritual wizards, claiming supernatural power and providing services to the population. More purely religious Muslim activists, who published their appeals to the believers and the population, condemned the social success of these strata, warning Muslims not to give credence to shamans and fortune-tellers, who were ‘proliferating like mushrooms after a rainstorm’.<sup>38</sup>

### **Conclusion. ‘Hall of mirrors’ in historiography**

As has already been admitted in the recent historiography, our knowledge of Islam in late socialist Central Asia has been under great influence of Cold War ideological biases on the causes of the USSR’s disintegration. Not only political clichés, but also all-catching notions on ethnicity and culture have formed this lexicon, with which scholars repeatedly try to approach the problems of late socialist transformations. For instance, it has been generally taken for granted that the Soviet secular society could not resolve ethnic conflicts and cultural tensions without reform. However, the notions of reform are projected and anticipated from the present.

Many publications in local Central Asian press in the 1980s reveal the communist party members’ concern of a possible threat coming from the alliance of Islam and nationalism.<sup>39</sup> Noticeably, at the start of the 1990s, the same *apparatchiki* were constructing the opposition between national patriotism of local ethnic groups and above-ethnic policies of reformist Islamic ideologies. Certain ideas of religious reformism, based on supra-national identity, which had been especially clearly pronounced at perestroika times, later started being suppressed actively by the governments of the newly established states.

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<sup>38</sup> Müzaffar Quttiqozha uli Qarashayiq ed., *The Prayers of the Prophets and the Sacred Qualities of the Sura “Ya-Sin”* (Turkestan 1997). Cited by Frank, *Popular Islamic Literature*, 23.

<sup>39</sup> Based on the content analysis of provincial Kazakhstani newspapers (*Kommunistik enbek*, *Ortalyk Kazakistan* and *Enbek tuy*) published in 1982 (made by Saltanat Orazbekova).

The Western states' officialdom, media and academia enthusiastically supported the accent on ethnicity in the nation-building policies of the Central Asian governments. In the same way as the Bolsheviks after 1917 had allied with Muslims of the former Russian Empire on the ground of nationalism, in the second part of the 1980s, with the launch of perestroika, democracy was intertwined with nationalism and explained as the right political system that would legitimately favour various nationalistic and religious expressions. At that time Central Asia was already open to Western scholars, whose voices acquired among Central Asian intellectuals special meanings of truth, previously unknown and hidden, but suddenly re-discovered correct interpretations of the region's history and contemporary development.<sup>40</sup> These scholars promoted the vision of the 'formerly oppressed ethnic, national and religious feelings of the Soviet Muslims'.<sup>41</sup> In most works by them, Islam (except for the official Islam) was seen as brutally oppressed religion and Muslim intellectuals as potential rebels against the Soviet power. Those Cold War times' interpretations of Islam were at their peak during perestroika and had an utterly deep effect on the local discourse in Central Asia, including academic discourse. The rhetoric of the oppression, long anticipated awakening and national liberation is still a priori present in contemporary Central Asian historiographies. Paradoxically and still not properly reflected upon, those Western conventions on Soviet Islam were produced based on the information available in the Soviet press and thus on the writings by Soviet journalists and scholars. Although the very recent Western historiography attempts to overcome those stereotypes, they become more grounded and reproduced in the national historiographies of Central Asian Republics. This 'hall of mirrors'<sup>42</sup> is continuously reproduced as our reflections upon late socialism

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<sup>40</sup> On the apologetic promotion of the liberal ideology of free market and democracy by Central Asian scientists and intellectuals (on the example of Kyrgyzstan) see: S. Amsler, *The Politics of Knowledge in Central Asia* (London and New York 2009).

<sup>41</sup> H. Carrere d'Encausse, *Muslims of the Soviet Empire. A Guide* (London 1985); C.W. Hostler, *The Turks of Central Asia* (1993); H. B. Paksoy, 'Basmachi Movement from Within: Account of Zeki Validi Togan', *Nationalities Papers* 23.2 (1993) 373-399; M. Rywkin, *Moscow's Muslim Challenge: Soviet Central Asia* (London 1982).

<sup>42</sup> M. Saroyan, 'Rethinking Islam in the Soviet Union' in: E. W. Walker, *Minorities, Mullabs, and Modernity: Reshaping community in the former Soviet Union*, (Berkeley 1997) 15-17.

*Irina Morozova*

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change under the influence of the current socio-political and cultural transformation.