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Bogomolov, A.

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Islamic Knowledge in Ukraine

ALEXANDER BOGOMOLOV

In a recently published dissertation, the period following the deportation of the Crimea Tatars in 1944 until the collapse of the Soviet Union is described as follows, "...religious education was confined to the family bounds. This had not only affected the quality of education but also the level of knowledge, which remained low throughout the period. Religious rites were observed only by the older generations. Functions of religion were so limited that it could not significantly influence the world outlook of the rising generation."¹ This observation, reflecting the dominant opinion of Ukrainian Muslims, may serve as a point of departure for taking a closer look at changes that occurred in the reproduction of Islamic knowledge over the past decade in Ukraine. The implicit assumption underpinning it seems to be that the social role of religion depends on the quality of knowledge and the availability of formal institutions in the community. Even though this assumption merits some further scrutiny because it is not fully supported by actual practice it is true that younger generations of Ukrainian Muslims are not satisfied with the traditional religious knowledge. Moreover, they do not view this knowledge as a proper tool of reference for constructing their future.

In spite of the absence of any institutionalized forms of Islam, such as formal mosques or a professional clergy, during the post-WWII period, religious life, as well as informal religious instruction, persisted within communities of the Volga Tatars who were scattered mainly across the mining region of Donbass, and within the compact Crimea Tatar groups of the Zaporizhia and Kherson regions; as well as among the Crimea Tatars living in exile, from which the majority returned in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fieldwork data indicate that not a single local community was without a small group of pious Muslims and a mullah. The mullah would, as a rule, have a couple of assistants and disciples helping him in ritual performances. The pious few often included relatives of the last generation of formally educated imams or graduates of *mektebs* and random seekers of religious inspiration. The senior mullah would either appoint a successor or the local community would nominate a new one from the assistants. Communal religious life was organized around the annual cycle of religious holidays and the critical moments of the cycle of life. The former included major Islamic holidays—*qurban bairamy* (*id al-adha*), *uraza bairamy* (*id al-fitr*), and the *mawlid*, and, in the case of Crimea Tatars, *Khidirles* and *Derviza* festivals celebrated at sacred places in Crimea.² The main life cycle events, which included such occasions as burials, obituary prayers, birth (name-giving), circumcision, and marriage rites, were marked with communal textual performances. A special social role was played by pious women, known as *abystai* in the Kazan Tatar tradition, who performed prayers on behalf of individuals, of which the most popular was the recitation of the whole Quran, usually in exchange for some remuneration.

In some localities, Friday prayers were held at private houses. Other ritual performances included religious chants (of presumably Sufi origin)—*ilahiyie* in the case of CrimeaTatars and *munajat* in the case of Kazan Tatars—recited in native Turkic language mainly for the celebration of *mawlid* and *Khidirles*. The only formally acknowledged Islamic place in the public domain in that period was the cemetery—usually a section of common burial grounds, but sometimes having a separate location—such as the case of the Sverdlovsk Muslim cemetery (Luhansk region).

It is often believed that under the Soviet regime in Ukraine—in particular after the mass deportation of Crimea Tatars—Islam ceased to be a communal project. New research, however, reveals that the local reproduction of religious knowledge has continued to date. Moreover, it has shaped to a great extent the religious fabric after the breakdown of the Soviet Union. Many younger Muslims consider this traditional knowledge too inadequate to address the challenges of today. They turn increasingly to alternative knowledge supplied by a variety of organizations and individuals from the Middle East and elsewhere.

Beyond the cycle of these main ritual festivals and performances most Muslims gradually absorbed the behavioural codes of their non-Muslim environment. The mullahs and the pious were not able to insist on the full scope of religious observance; Muslim traditions were losing ground and were increasingly blended with common Soviet customs resulting in a rather unorthodox synthesis.

Continuous reproduction

How much knowledge did this type of religiosity require and how was it being reproduced? Some proficiency in Arabic was required at least for two

important textual performances—reading the Quran and the writing of amulets.³ The major performances involving Quranic texts—the public recitation at various collective prayers—implied learning *tajwid* (recitation), which could only be done at the hands of a teacher. Often, the Arabic script was conveniently substituted by a transliteration in Cyrillic. Consequently, many of second and third generation mullahs were no longer capable of actually reading Arabic and could only perform their prayers from memorization. The skill to compose prayer was also part of the expertise of a mullah or a pious woman. Proficiency in the sacred language, Arabic, was perceived as the ability to recite correctly and according to the rules of *tajwid*, while focusing on the ceremonial and symbolic value of particular fragments of the Quranic text and not on its literal meaning. The scope of knowledge transferred from one generation to another within the narrow circle of pious men and women was contingent on the abilities and dedication of the older generation of mullahs. In some localities the older generation managed to transfer nearly fully their scope of knowledge and skills like, for example, in the city of Kharkiv, where an elderly Bukhara-trained imam managed to prepare three disciples, two of whom act as imams until today. But some types of knowledge were limited in terms of reproduction by their very nature. The knowledge linked to the more magical aspects of religion—a valuable social asset for an individual who was believed to have mastered it—was never meant to be open to any lay Muslim.

Only male mullahs acted as teachers for those seeking religious knowledge. Pious women addressed familial and individual aspects of religiosity, while mullahs the more formal and communal ones. Women dealt with the spiritual, inner (and also native) religious traditions—such as the recitation of sacred chants. While the social context in the Soviet times precluded an open profession of religious duties, especially for younger age groups, the elderly pious females obtained an important role in expressing the commitment to Islam by individual lay members of the community.

During the Soviet period access to religious expertise had become more difficult while public space available for religious practices had been significantly reduced. Even within these constraints religious knowledge, as reproduced across two to three generations, remained adequate, in terms of its content, to the spiritual and social purposes it served; a condition that was not unlike that of many Muslims living elsewhere. Therefore, the transformation the Islamic knowledge in that area is best described as a functional reduction. The most important outcome of it was not so much the demise of religious practices or skills but the fact that Islam—just as Russian Orthodoxy—ceased to be a universal belief system explaining the world. Consequently, its role as a moral code was also curtailed.

Post-Soviet experiences

Today the local production of knowledge by and large follows the track typical of localized traditional Islam. With the re-establishment of Islamic institutions and hierarchies in the early 1990, those pious Muslims who had been trained in informal settings of Islamic learning came to the fore. They filled the vacancies in the newly emerging clergy which was now comprised of muftis, deputy muftis, and imams. Some of the older religious leaders, after being succeeded by younger clerics, continued to be vocal public speakers giving voice to the traditional local Islam. For instance, Nuri-efendi, a former Crimean mufti now runs a regular *Islam Nuru* page in the Crimean Tatar *Qirim* newspaper and appears on the radio show *Din ve Urf Adetler* (Religious and Local Customs). Riza Fazil produced a series of books—*Diniy urf-adetlerimiz* (Our Religious Customs)—in cooperation with the son of an imam who had been persecuted in late 1920s.⁴

The local Islamic tradition is held in esteem by Crimean Tatar politicians. Being nationalists they consider whatever is “our own” has greater value than any imported good. Thus they champion “our traditional Crimean Islam.” They hardly understand the limitations caused by this notion of “traditional Islam” when addressing the challenges of modernity.

With the advent of religious freedom after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Muslim organizations and individuals from Turkey, the Arab Middle East and South Asia appeared on the Ukrainian scene. It began with the arrival of preachers of various schools of thought. By the late 1990s a network of NGOs, mosques and education facilities with links to the Muslim heartlands were established in those places with sizable Muslim minorities as well as the capital, Kiev. Much effort was put into opening education facilities (madradas and universities), offering both introductory and formal advanced courses. Religious education and guidance is now being provided by a variety of international and national organizations, including the official Turkish Diyanet, Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi Endowment, *ce-maats* of the Süleymaniya, followers of Fethullah Gülen, as well as the Ikhwan Muslimun, Hizb al-Tahrir, Salafis, the Tabligh, and even Habashis.⁵ Many young Crimeans are eagerly studying Islam as imparted by these groups and often shifting from one to the other. In spite of this seemingly large and varied supply of knowledge the more educated of them feel that their thirst for knowledge remains unquenched. As yet, there is very little local production following the arrival of new ideas. A unique attempt to involve Ukrainian Muslims in this process is the establishment of an Islamic monthly by an Arab-sponsored NGO network with ties to the Qatar based Egyptian scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi. The group has also created an Internet resource page (<http://www.islamua.net>) and produces occasionally short radio programs.

It is difficult to judge to what extent new types of religious knowledge and organizations impinge on the Muslim communities of Ukraine. Is it possible to say that some of the Ukrainian Muslims are actually Ikhwani or Suleymanci? For instance, are the youth distributing flyers of Hizb al-Tahrir in April 2003 and rallying against the US invasion of Iraq, Tahriris in the sense that they have adopted the movement’s



PHOTO BY VLADIMIR DOKIN, ©AFP, 2003

Praying during a rally devoted to the 59th anniversary of the deportation of more than 200,000 Tartars from Crimea during the Stalin era, Simferopol, 18 May 2003

Notes

1. R. I. Khayali, *Krymskotatarskiy narod v usloviakh deportatsii, 1944-1967* (Simferopol, 2000), 97.
2. Some Crimean Tartars used to come back from exile annually to their native villages and towns to celebrate *Khidriles* in 1970s (festivals in the honour of the saint Khidir). However, there is no such data for *Derviza* (celebrated on the day of autumnal equinox), which has apparently discontinued in exile but has been re-introduced after repatriation.
3. The tradition of writing a Quranic verse on piece of paper, folded in a triangular form and quilted in a water-proof material to be worn around the neck in a fashion similar to a cross in Christian tradition—is widespread among both Kazan and Crimea Tartars in Ukraine.
4. *Buyurynyuz Duagha: Dualar Kitabı*, co-authored by Abdulwait Sakhtara (Simferopol, 2001); *101 Dua* (Simferopol, 2002).
5. For Habashis see A. Nizar Hamzeh and R. Hrair Dekmejian, “A Sufi response to political Islamism: al-Ahbash of Lebanon,” *The International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28 (1996): 217-229.

Alexander Bogomolov is Vice-President of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and head of the Modern Orient Department at Krymski Institute of Oriental Studies, Kiev, Ukraine. He is currently involved in a fieldwork-based project “Islamic Identity in Ukraine” sponsored by the International Renaissance Foundation (Soros Foundation Network).
E-mail: bgl@gilan.uar.net