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The Art of (Not) Being Governed: On Religious Persecution and Freedoms in the ‘Russian Empire’

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The brutal invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 has raised the spectre of the Russian imperialist project—a fierce and devastating power seeking to dominate and eventually assimilate varieties of Others—communities that have religious or ethnic self-identification distinct from the majority Russian population. The ongoing conflict brings renewed attention to institutions, cultural objects and discourses in present-day Russia that continue to bear imperial symbolism and are discriminatory against certain minority groups.¹ An ostensibly straightforward process of scrutinising and deconstructing the Russian imperial legacy encounters serious challenges related to issues such as the agency of the oppressors and the oppressed, contested history, and complexity of identities shaped as a result of centuries-long existence as an ethnic or religious minority within a large multivocal state. As part of the *Leidschrift* special issue on religious persecution, this contribution focuses on a particular aspect of the Russian empire and its contemporary legacies—the institutions of governance created to discipline and control Russia’s non-Orthodox, particularly Muslim citizens.² Specifically, the paper briefly traces how these governance systems have metamorphosed over the centuries, following drastic changes in Russia’s political outlook.

Within the framework of the current issue, the focus on Russia’s Muslims, a historically prominent religious minority in the country, enables scrutiny of popular understandings of the ‘religious persecution’ notion. The discussion to follow aims to complexify in two ways our perception of the

¹ See, for instance, B. Kassymbekova and E. Marat, ‘Time to Question Russia’s Imperial Innocence’ *Ponars*, April 2022. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/time-to-question-russias-imperial-innocence/>; C. Michel, ‘Decolonize Russia’, *Atlantic*, 27 May 2022. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/05/russia-putin-colonization-ukraine-chechnya/639428/>; also M. Laruelle, ‘Imperializing Russia: Empire by Default or Design?’, *Ponars*, 22 August 2022. <https://www.ponarseurasia.org/imperializing-russia-empire-by-default-or-design/>. All links accessed 21 September 2022.

² Here I distinguish between the historical period of Russian imperial governance that ended with the abdication of Tsar Nicolas II in 1917 (Russian empire) and the argument that Russian imperial project has survived both the Bolshevik Revolution and the collapse of Communism in 1991 (‘Russian empire’).

relationship that exists between a religious minority community and an imperial state. The first deliberation concerns the forms that institutionalised and officially sanctioned religious persecution may take. In a widely used definition of the term, religious persecution tends to refer to violence and discrimination practices against members of a religious minority; these practices frequently involve the institutionalisation of prejudice against an out-group and deprivation of this group's members of individual and political rights.³ This paper assumes that boundaries that distinguish an in-group from an out-group are constructed and hence continuously in flux, and their redrawing reflects broader social and political transformations. By bringing into the spotlight the very term 'religion' and how its meaning has changed over time, this paper traces different practices that the Russian state has used to govern its Muslim population at various moments of history, from the imperial to Soviet and later post-Soviet periods. Such an approach allows exploring systematic limitations of religious freedoms introduced as part of governing state structures under different political regimes and reveals the fluidity of boundaries between what is perceived as persecution and as normalised practices of control. Some limitations of religious freedom imposed by the state may be less visible and direct than acts of violent oppression; others fit more easily into the common definition of religious persecution outlined above. Yet, regardless their nature, all these limitation mechanisms remain invasive and detrimental to targeted religious communities. A central question that will guide the discussion is: what criteria do we use to distinguish religious persecution from systems of religious governance, all of which necessarily restrict the freedoms of a religious community in one way or another?

Secondly, the paper relies on the case of Russia's Muslims to challenge the idea of religious persecution being a one-way, top-down act where persecuted minorities are passive subjects of the imposed control mechanisms. Muslims in Russia have been part of the multi-confessional and multi-ethnic state for centuries; although often treated with suspicion and outright contempt by the Russian cultural, religious and political elites, Muslims have played a visible role in the governance structures (and continue to do so). This embeddedness in the institutions of control meant that the state-imposed mechanisms of making Muslims docile citizens of the empire had become deeply engrained in the history and identity of the religious

³ D. T. Smith, *Religious Persecution and Political Order in the United States* (New York NY 2015) 26.

minority. This raises another question central to this paper: how can we speak of victims of religious persecution without depriving them of agency and with respect to their current identities?

In discussing various forms of state-imposed control mechanisms, this paper follows a chronological order. The next section discusses instruments of religious governance imposed throughout the Russian imperial period, characterised by the continuous incorporation of Muslim communities until the toppling of the Romanovs in 1917. The section afterwards will briefly cover the Soviet project of state atheism that sought to discredit the Islamic legacy and foster ethnic nationalism among Muslim minority communities; though successful in utterly transforming Muslims' culture and everyday practice, the Soviet state failed in its attempt to eliminate religion completely. Finally, we will look at the developments in the post-Soviet era, specifically at relations within the state-Orthodox Church-Islamic institutions triangle. Concluding remarks will summarise the main points of the paper.

Being Muslim in Imperial Russia

The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 left Russia as the only independent Orthodox country for centuries to come.⁴ Russia back in the sixteenth century, still the Muscovite state became increasingly insistent in claiming the 'Third Rome' title, which meant, among other symbols of power, that the Russian ruler could assert a divine source of his authority and thereby enjoy a significant degree of legitimacy.⁵ Against this background of rapid confessionalisation of the Russian state, the conquest of Kazan Khanate in 1552, the first major Muslim-dominated settlement to be seized by a Russian

⁴ At least until the establishment of the Balkan national states in the nineteenth century. For a good overview of the imperial period, see V. Bobrovnikov, 'Islam in the Russian Empire' in: D. Lieven et al ed., *Cambridge History of Russia, 2: Imperial Russia, 1689–1917* (Cambridge 2006) 202–23.

⁵ A. Laats, 'The Concept of The Third Rome and Its Political Implications' in: A. Kilp and S. Andres eds. *Religion and Politics in Multicultural Europe: Perspectives and Challenges* (Tartu 2009) 98–113.

ruler could be justified as an Orthodox crusade against the unbelievers.⁶ The conquest resulted in the conversion to Orthodox Christianity of at least some parts of the subjugated population. However, as historian Paul Werth rightly notes, ‘for most of the period before the [eighteenth] century neither the state nor the church did much to promote conversion’.⁷ Starting from the sixteenth century, Russia, similar to other continental empires such as the Habsburg and Ottoman states, was incorporating foreign nationalities at high speed; the process was accompanied by the co-optation of these nationalities’ elites into the state service. Fundamentally a multinational empire ruled by a multinational elite, Russia for a long time had no majority population against which a minority could be conceptualised.⁸ Probably the oldest notion that comes close to symbolising a minority is the word *inovertsy* (lit. ‘those of other faith’), meaning anyone who was not strictly Orthodox, i.e. Muslims, Jews, as well as other Christians (Lutherans, Catholics, etc.).⁹ Throughout its history, the Russian empire fought many wars against Muslims: the occupation of Kazan in 1552 was followed by numerous Russo-Turkish wars, then the Great Caucasus War (c. 1800–1860s) and finally the conquest of Central Asia (1718–1895). Although the tsarist government had been confronted with Islam for almost three centuries, the ‘Muslim Question’ as a problem that needed close attention did not emerge until the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Of course, religion was important well before the nineteenth century: the Russian statesmen regarded the growing empire as an ‘Orthodox state’, which meant that the promotion of Orthodoxy among its heterodox subjects was among the empire’s tasks.¹¹ Yet the strong missionary impulse in Russia was rather a sporadic than a systematic occurrence and manifested itself as a

⁶ J. Pelenski, *Russia and Kazan: Conquest and Imperial Ideology (1438-1560s)* (The Hague and Paris 1974).

⁷ P.W. Werth, ‘Coercion and Conversion: Violence and the Mass Baptism of the Volga Peoples, 1740-55’, *Kritika Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 4:3 (2003) 543-569: 544.

⁸ P.W. Werth, ‘What Is a “Minority” in an Imperial Formation? Thoughts on the Russian Empire’, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 41:3 (2021) 325-331.

⁹ Werth, ‘What Is a “Minority”’, 326.

¹⁰ E.I. Campbell, *The Muslim Question and Russian Imperial Governance* (Bloomington 2015).

¹¹ P.W. Werth, *The Tsar’s Foreign Faiths: Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia* (Oxford 2014) 75-85.

potent combination of material incentives and coercion. For instance, in the 1740-50s, entire communities of Muslims in the Volga Urals were, in some cases forcefully, baptised into Orthodoxy. It is crucial, however, to recognise that neither the Orthodox Church nor the imperial government openly sanctioned the use of violence. The state feared uprisings, and the Church was concerned about the genuineness of forced conversions. The cases of violence that did occur in the first half of the eighteenth century should be understood as signs of St. Petersburg's inability to exercise adequate control: many zealous missionaries simply superseded officially sanctioned missionary methods, while others used 'conversion as a way of facilitating the exploitation of non-Russian rural inhabitants for personal enrichment'.¹²

In the popular account of Russian history, Catherine the Great (r. 1762-1796) is depicted as an enlightened absolutist who, under the influence of flourishing European liberal philosophy, enshrined religious toleration: her policies officially forbade the demolition of mosques and the forced conversion of Muslims to Christianity. Yet a deep and philosophical engagement with the concept of 'religious toleration' in Russia was practically absent until the late nineteenth century.¹³ Religious toleration sanctioned by Catherine the Great contributed to the recognition of the Muslim community as citizens of the empire, which, in turn, formulated the need for their incorporation into the imperial systems. In 1788, the empress created the Muslim Spiritual Assembly (also known as *Muftiate*). This institution was supposed to mirror the Orthodox Christian governance structure and establish authority in all matters of Muslim communities related to property, inheritance, marriage and religious law.¹⁴ According to Robert Crews, the Assembly and creation of Islamic clergy rooted the efforts of the tsarist regime to govern 'as patron and guardian' of non-Orthodox faiths. New Muslim governance institutions created the ground for a 'confessional state',

¹² Werth, *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths*, 76-77.

¹³ M. Khodarkovsky and R. Geraci, 'Introduction' in: R. Geraci and M. Khodarkovsky eds., *Of Religion and Empire: Missions, Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca 2001) 1-15: 7.

¹⁴ M. Tuna, *Imperial Russia's Muslims: Islam, Empire and European Modernity, 1788-1914* (Cambridge MA 2015); R.D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge MA 2006); R. Geraci, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia* (Ithaca NY 2001).

which drew on ‘pattern of interdependence between religious and state authorities’.¹⁵

The process of institutionalising Islam was not a straightforward path. Some scholars argue that by the mid-nineteenth century Muslims in Inner Russia, by and large, came to acknowledge the authority of the state. In the view of others, Muslims could effectively keep the state government out of the many areas of Muslim everyday life. Both interpretations, however, recognise that, at least for Muslim communities in the Volga-Ural region, the created system permitted relatively independent development of Islamic culture, self-organisation and control over religious education.¹⁶ These circumstances enabled Muslims in this region to gain significant powers within the imperial structures. As Danielle Ross has argued in her recent monograph, Tatar Muslims, in particular, can be regarded as both the colonised and colonisers in the history of the Russian empire. Although they suffered the consequences of the 1552 conquest, they managed to become active participants in Russia’s colonial expansion into Muslim Central Asia, thanks to their expansive and influential networks within institutions of religious education, scholarship and trade. As a result, in late imperial Russia, Muslim Tatars had created their own sphere of influence, which also necessarily drew on mechanisms of subjugation and domination over other, less powerful communities.¹⁷

Besides the ‘disciplining’ dimension of the confessional state, which was established by the creation of religious institutions and clergy, there was also an alternative orientation focused on ‘discrediting’ other confessions.¹⁸ The binary division into ‘them-us’ or ‘allowed-prohibited’ religious communities would remain a prominent strategy for governing religious communities in Russia during the imperial period and the decades after. Producing orthodoxy about ‘heterodoxies’, i.e. non-Orthodox religions in the Russian empire, was not limited to the scholarship of Orthodox Christian

¹⁵ R. Crews, ‘Empire and the Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia’, *The American Historical Review* 108:1 (2003) 50–83: 52.

¹⁶ E.g., Tuna, *Imperial Russia’s Muslims*; Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*; D. Ross, *Tatar Empire: Kazan’s Muslims and the Making of Imperial Russia* (Bloomington 2020).

¹⁷ Ross, *Tatar Empire*.

¹⁸ P. Werth, ‘Lived Orthodoxy and Confessional Diversity: The Last Decade on Religion in Modern Russia’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12:4 (2011) 849-865: 857.

theologians.¹⁹ Knowledge specific to the Russian Orthodox Church became interlinked with discourses of Russian cultural and political elites, as well as Muslim intellectuals, who took part in creating ‘a common Russian political and cultural sphere during a period when European countries were building their nation states’.²⁰

Like other empires of the period, Russia established institutions of Oriental studies—various academic disciplines that covered a range of topics related to the Muslim Orient. As mentioned above, events of the mid-nineteenth century, particularly the Crimean war (1853-6), contributed to the creation of ‘Muslim’ as a category of scholarly analysis to refer to vastly different communities. As educated Russian elites became increasingly concerned about the loyalty of the empire’s new and old Muslim citizens, the state’s penetration into Muslim affairs intensified. Particularly, the long *jihad* against Russian colonisers in the North Caucasus and the spectre of Pan-Islamism that gained prominence by the turn of the twentieth century forced the Russian state to engage not only with institutional but also intellectual domination over subjected Muslim communities. However, as Michael Kemper notes, even during this period, Muslims were not ‘voiceless’ subjects of imperial intellectual control: they participated in the shaping of Russian Oriental studies as informants, critics and dialogue partners to educated Russian elites.²¹

Thus, when applying the notion of religious persecution to the context of imperial Russia, we necessarily have to address epistemological complexities. The Russian empire’s expansion was undoubtedly accompanied by violence and atrocities against Muslim communities that became incorporated into the mighty state. For a long time, the Muslim had been the ontological Other whether defined in terms of Christian theology or Orientalist scholarship. At the same time, religion, especially since the nineteenth century, became a pillar of the imperial and later national idea of the Russian state that struggled to catch up with rapidly modernising and secularising Western Europe. And in the process of fleshing out its image as neither Asian nor European but a Eurasian empire, the tsarist state attempted

¹⁹ Geraci, *Window on the East*; V. Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient* (Oxford 2011).

²⁰ M. Kemper, ‘Russian Orientalism’ in: *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*. <https://oxfordre.com/asianhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.001.001/acrefore-9780190277727-e-297>. Last accessed 26 September 2022.

²¹ Kemper, ‘Russian Orientalism’; Tolz, *Russia’s Own Orient*.

to accommodate various religious communities by creating complex systems of control and mutual interdependence.²² Although a subject of reoccurring instances of violent pressure to assimilate through conversion, subjugation to imperial institutions, and intellectual domination Muslims nevertheless had their ways of influencing the Russian imperial project. The further discussion shows that the institutions created by the Russian empire, which Muslims used to exercise their agency, survived the fall of the Romanov dynasty and albeit in a modified form would persist throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet periods.

Soviet and/or Muslim: Islam in the Soviet Union

There are several ways to understand relations between the Soviet state and the Russian Empire. Some authors would argue that the USSR was essentially a continuation of the Russian Empire: the Bolsheviks only modernised the Russian empire and made minority nationalism compatible with colonial imperial policy. For others, the Soviet Union was a multi-ethnic entity of a completely new type.²³ An analysis of the Bolsheviks' approach to religion becomes necessarily influenced by this larger epistemological uneasiness in drawing clear-cut boundaries between novel and old imperial elements.

At the core of the Bolsheviks' project lay a world freed from religion: with their rise to power in October 1917, the Bolsheviks promised to liberate the people from the shackles of the old world. A gigantic experiment of building socialism and implementing rapid modernisation across the USSR territory sought to turn this vision into reality; among the introduced measures were the destruction of religious institutions and the aggressive but controlled promotion of ethnic nationalism. Many academic studies focused on the repressive side of these policies (and rightly so!). Islam shared the fate with other religions in the country: it was declared feudal in character, linked to class enemies and thus doomed to be purged.²⁴ What followed was the

²² E.g., G. Sibgatullina, 'When the Other Speaks: Ismā'īl Gasprinskii and the Concept of Islamic Reformation', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 65 (2022) 214-247.

²³ E.g., T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca NY and London 2001).

²⁴ M. Kemper, 'The Soviet Discourse on the Origin and Class Character of Islam, 1923-1933', *Die Welt des Islams* 49:1 (2009) 1-48. Also, Sh. Keller, *To Moscow, Not*

demolition of mosques, nationalisation of religious property and extermination of Muslim intellectuals. Religion disappeared from the public sphere and became confined to an increasingly narrow private sphere.²⁵

Without ignoring these devastating effects on the livelihood of religious communities, more recent scholarship on Islam in the Soviet Union, however, has tried to complexify the picture: ‘Soviet’ and ‘Muslim’ did not have to mean mutually exclusive connotations, at least not for everyone. Especially in the early years of the Bolshevik rule, there were local voices that ‘could be simultaneously Muslim and Bolshevik’. That is, although the overwhelming majority of Muslims despised Soviet militant atheism, there was a share of those reformist Muslims whose views were in line with the Soviet program of reforming education and modernising communities in Muslim-dominated regions.²⁶ Paolo Sartori notes, ‘there are instances when the revolutionary terminology seems to have conflated with the Islamic reformist discourse’,²⁷ meaning that some early Soviet Muslims welcomed the Soviet reforms despite (or because of) their radical nature.

Though repressive to lived religion, the Soviet Union in itself was, in many ways, ‘a distinct political, ideological, and spiritual project’.²⁸ It relegated functions previously held by religion to various spheres of culture and politics, while the meaning and purpose of religious systems had been utterly transformed. After the repressions of the 1930s, Stalin re-established the Muftiate for Muslims in Inner Russia and created similar institutions in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The primary reason for such a step was Stalin’s need to bolster popular support against the Nazi invasion.²⁹ The fact that Stalin decided to bring religion back into Soviet life can be regarded as evidence that he perceived the political threat of religion to be effectively

Mecca: The Soviet Campaign against Islam in Central Asia, 1917–1941 (Westport CT and London 2001).

²⁵ Keller, *To Moscow, Not Mecca*.

²⁶ P. Sartori, ‘Towards a History of the Muslims’ Soviet Union: A View from Central Asia’, *Die Welt des Islams* 50:3 (2010) 315–334: 320.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ V. Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton NJ 2018): 8.

²⁹ Y. Ro’i, *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev* (London 2000); E. Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (New York NY 2017).

neutralised, or at least that the benefits of cooperating with religious institutions weighed heavier than the risks of such endeavour. An opposite point of view would be to argue that the re-emergence of official religious institutions in public life signalled the inability of the state to get rid of religion entirely.

The Soviet model of church-state relations had more than a family resemblance to systems established under the imperial order. The Muftiates continued to operate as mediators between the state and Muslim communities, seeking to entrench a mutually beneficial relationship. Having monopolised access to state resources, the Soviet Muftiates had the power similar to the imperial Spiritual Assembly to ‘enfranchise certain Muslim leaders and marginalise others’.³⁰

All religions in the Soviet Union and Islam, in particular, had acquired new functions, as the Soviet political leadership looked for nation-binding themes and emphasised ‘national religion’. The amalgamation of ethnic and religious identities say, Tatar, Kyrgyz or Kazakh, on the one hand, and Muslim, on the other became institutionalised and public. In other words, there was a process of ‘ethnicising’ religion.³¹ In his seminal work, Adeeb Khalid shows how the Soviet experience deprived Central Asian Islam of its previous functions: for instance, Islam ceased to be a source of publicly held ethical values. Instead, it became primarily an attribute of local national heritage.³² Among the unexpected results of the process, when ethnic and religious identities became intertwined, was the deep embeddedness of religion into the identity of the Soviet nation. Matthijs Pelkmans argues that ‘whereas the Soviet regime de-legitimised religious structures and repressed most aspects of religion’s public manifestations, the regime ironically also encoded religious identities through its nationality politics’.³³ When religion returned to public life globally by the end of the 1970s, it became visible and

³⁰ J. Eden, *God Save the USSR: Soviet Muslims and the Second World War* (New York NY 2021) 160.

³¹ M. Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullabs, and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Late Soviet Union* (Berkeley CA 1997): 95 as quoted in M. Pelkmans, ‘“Culture” as a Tool and an Obstacle: Missionary Encounters in Post-Soviet Kyrgyzstan’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 13 (2007) 881-899: 884.

³² A. Khalid, *Islam after Communism. Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Oakland CA 2014).

³³ Pelkmans, ‘“Culture” as a Tool and an Obstacle’, 883. Also, J.G. Pankhurst, ‘Soviet Society and Soviet Religion’, *Journal of Church and State* 28:3 (1986): 409–22.

politically contested also in the USSR. The relaxation of religious expression in the late 1980s and the sudden collapse of Communism in 1991 led to a renewed interest in cultural and religious roots in all of the newly established post-Soviet states.³⁴

In this clash between religion and the Soviet system, it is apparent that religion more than just survived. The state instrumentalised religion on the eve of the Great Patriotic War (1941-45) to mobilise the masses; yet even after the war, religious institutions continued to play an important part not only in ensuring oversight over communities but also in shaping the Soviet sense of self. In the early 1990s, Russia witnessed a religious reawakening accompanied by the reconstruction of religious property and heightened interest in religious education. As numerous surveys and studies have shown, the religious revival, however, had little to do with a deep-rooted religious mentality.³⁵ Muslims, like other religious groups in the country, had to build their religious identity anew, as connections to traditions of previous generations had been lost in a dramatic way.

Muslims in the Russian World

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia remained a multinational state and had to face the same old dilemmas related to the governance of ethnically and religiously distinct communities. After the short euphoria fuelled by newly granted freedoms in the early 1990s and the economic collapse towards the end of the decade, Russia, under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, has returned to old governance mechanisms. These were similar to those exercised during the imperial and Soviet periods; the primary goal of the post-

³⁴ E.g., J. Johnson, M. Stepaniants and B. Forest eds., *Religion and Identity in Modern Russia: The Revival of Orthodoxy and Islam* (Aldershot 2005); M. Pelkmans, 'Introduction: Post-Soviet Space and The Unexpected Turns of Religious Life' in: M. Pelkmans ed., *Conversion After Socialism: Disruptions, Modernisms and Technologies of Faith In the Former Soviet Union* (Oxford 2009) 1-16.

³⁵ E.g., A. Agadjanian, 'Revising Pandora's Gifts: Religious and National Identity in the Post-Soviet Societal Fabric', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 53:3 (2001) 473-488; G. Fagan, *Believing in Russia: Religious Policy After Communism* (Abingdon 2013).

Soviet religious governance system was to entrench control of the state over religious communities and create mutually beneficial interdependence.³⁶

Religious life in the post-Soviet period is, however, qualitatively different from its pre-Soviet manifestations, despite various attempts to assert continuity between imperial and post-Soviet religious institutions. It is characterised by ‘a structural disproportion between the low levels of religious commitment and the high profile of public religion’.³⁷ The state remains *de jure* secular, though, as Alexander Agadjanian suggests, one should keep in mind that Russian secularity is nationally and historically specific.³⁸ Officially, Russia recognises four ‘traditional religions’ that have the right to enjoy political and financial support from the state; these are Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and Orthodox Christianity, the latter being first among equals. Especially in the last decade, the public debate has increasingly stressed the importance of Russia’s Christian roots: its messianic mission of preserving true faith and ‘traditional values’ against the pernicious cultural liberalism of the West.³⁹ In the current ideological context, other religious denominations in Russia have no choice but to follow the example of the Orthodox Church. Official Islamic elites heads of numerous Muftiates that emerged in the post-Soviet space have become partners to the state in endorsing a moral-conservative agenda. Some of them have remained in power since the 1980s, proving the same lack of generational shift that plagues the country’s political apparatus. These elites have developed a close resemblance to their Orthodox Christian counterparts in terms of functions and language, which have brought them closer to the political establishment but, in some cases, also

³⁶ A. Agadjanian, ‘Tradition, Morality and Community: Elaborating Orthodox Identity In Putin’s Russia’, *Religion, State & Society* 45:1 (2017) 39-60; G. Sibgatullina, ‘Translating Islam into the Language of The Russian State and the Orthodox Church’, *Religion, State & Society* 47:2 (2019) 234-247.

³⁷ A. Agadjanian, ‘From Urban Landscape To National Culture: Russia’s Conspicuous Religious Simulacra and Enduring, If Fragile, Secularity’, *Social Compass* 68:3 (2021) 392-409: 402.

³⁸ *Ibidem*. Also, K. Stoeckl, ‘Russian Orthodoxy and Secularism’, *Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and Politics* 1:2 (2020) 1–75.

³⁹ E.g., S. Chapnin, ‘The Rhetoric of Traditional Values in Contemporary Russia’ in: K. Stoeckl and D. Uzlaner eds., *Postsecular Conflicts: Debating tradition in Russia and the United States* (Innsbruck 2020) 128-138; L. Di Puppò, ‘The Paradoxes of a Localised Islamic Orthodoxy: Rethinking Tatar Traditional Islam In Russia’, *Ethnicities* 19:2 (2019) 311-334.

distanced them from the communities they are supposed to represent.⁴⁰ Until the 2012 conservative turn in Russia, Islamic leadership participated in elaborating various ideological projects, e.g., ‘Islamic Eurasianism’, that propagated Russia’s geographical and cultural exceptionalism;⁴¹ after 2012, the room for ideas production has been severely curtailed. Over the years the Russian state has also repeatedly relied on prominent Muslim leaders while engaging in ‘religious diplomacy’ in relations with Muslim-majority countries.⁴²

Against this background, the position of non-Orthodox religious minorities remains precarious. On the one hand, minority ‘traditional religions’, such as Islam, enjoy participation in the public sphere. Alexander Agadjanian notes that ‘the norm of the freedom of religion is strong enough to approve the special dress code in mosques and in passports’.⁴³ On the other hand, ‘it is not strong enough to outweigh the norm of secularity in the case of public schools’;⁴⁴ Muslim teachers and children are not allowed to wear hijab at school.⁴⁵ Thus, there is a thin line between ‘tradition’ and elements perceived as ‘foreign’ or ‘excessive’—the latter being commonly seen as destabilising for societal coherence. The aggravation of the conflict in the North Caucasus in the 1990s, which led to the two Chechen wars, as well as migration flows from Muslim republics in Central Asia, has contributed to the stigmatisation of Muslims as a potential security threat. Consequently, Islamophobia has gained a foothold in public discourse and the media.⁴⁶

For ordinary Muslims, the new post-Soviet realities have brought a degree of freedom. In the words of Teo Benussi: ‘Islam is no longer hidden or marginalised as it was in the Soviet era’; yet it is still ‘assigned a “proper” place – both physical and discursive – by the external, temporal, avowedly

⁴⁰ G. Sibgatullina, *Languages of Islam and Christianity in Post-Soviet Russia* (Leiden 2020).

⁴¹ G. Sibgatullina and M. Kemper, ‘The Imperial Paradox: Islamic Eurasianism in Contemporary Russia’ in: N. Friess and K. Kaminskij eds., *Resignification of Borders: Eurasianism and the Russian World* (Berlin 2019) 97-124.

⁴² R. Bekkin, *People of Reliable Loyalty...: Muftiates and the State in Modern Russia* (PhD dissertation, Södertörns Högskola 2020).

⁴³ Agadjanian, ‘From Urban Landscape’, 396.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ K. Aitamurto, ‘Discussions about Indigenous, National and Transnational Islam in Russia’, *Religion, State and Society* 47:2 (2019) 198-213.

⁴⁶ E.g., K. Aitamurto, ‘Patriotic Loyalty and Interest Representation among the Russian Islamic Elite’, *Religion* 51:2 (2020) 280-298.

non-confessional authority of the state'.⁴⁷ In his view, indigenous Muslim communities in post-Soviet Russia have found themselves locked up in a 'golden cage': on the one hand, Islam and Islamic heritage however idealised and constructed provide a source of ethnic identity, pride, and 'transgenerational solidarity'. On the other, the current political conditions and existing institutions prevent Muslims from stepping beyond the normative understanding of religion and limit them to state-induced conservative interpretations.⁴⁸

Conclusion

Although there is an understandable temptation to view the history of Russia as a continuous and uninterrupted process of imperial and colonial expansion, the longevity of the 'Russian empire' is probably best explained as a history full of gaps and significant ruptures. Although the Russian political elites today may claim an interrupted continuity between Kyivan Rus' and the Russian Federation,⁴⁹ the meaning and functions of religion have drastically changed, especially during the 'short' twentieth century. From communal belonging to individual beliefs to political norms interpreter, religion in Russia has evolved; yet precisely, its persistence remains an important feature of Russia's 'modernity'.⁵⁰

To comprehend the forms and nature of religious persecution in Russia, one has to keep in mind the complex ways in which the majority and minority communities have been defined throughout Russian history. From the early days a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional state, the 'Russian empire' has been using a complex combination of coercion, co-optation and collaboration methods to control its minorities. And subjugation methods that we would commonly understand as 'religious persecution' have been applied not only to non-Orthodox communities; the Russian Orthodox Church has also been fundamentally transformed, for instance during the

⁴⁷ M. Benussi, 'The Golden Cage: Heritage, (Ethnic) Muslimness, and the Place of Islam in Post-Soviet Tatarstan', *Religion, State and Society* 49:4-5 (2021) 314-330: 327.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ E.g., E. Klimenko, 'Building the Nation, Legitimizing the State: Russia—My History and Memory of the Russian Revolutions in Contemporary Russia', *Nationalities Papers* 49:1 (2021) 72-88.

⁵⁰ Werth, 'Lived Orthodoxy and Confessional Diversity', 864.

reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725) and under the Bolsheviks. Large minority religious communities, like Muslims, were subject to direct violence, though this was not a default state strategy for dealing with non-Orthodox citizens. Instead, the state has repeatedly re-invented institutionally complex forms of control and governance. Therefore, the dramatic changes in Russia's political outlook after 1917 and 1991 always meant severe consequences also for Muslim communities. Although every time the new political elites sought to distance themselves from their predecessors, they eventually reinstated old institutions, albeit in new forms and taking into account the novel historical contexts.

The Russian case may serve as an example of how boundaries between religious persecution as a manifestation of violent oppression and mechanisms of control over religious communities can be blurred. Especially starting from the late eighteenth century, when the notions of 'Muslim' and 'Christian' gained associations with distinct civilisations and cultures, attempts at physical extermination, either through expulsion, murder or baptism, by and large, gave way to more sophisticated methods of intellectual subjugation. The Soviet experiment in the twentieth century was unique, for it did not seek to control religion but attempted to eradicate it completely as a relic of the past. As the discussion has shown, the experiment was unsuccessful. Religion continued to exist in various forms, and after WWII began returning to the public sphere, albeit in a limited fashion. However, the massive crackdown on religious elites and means of knowledge transmission left a profound impact on the meaning and functions of religion. It became intertwined with ethnic identities and Soviet heritage. Human-mediated connections to the past has been irreversibly lost; therefore, present-day attempts to revive pre-1917 religious traditions or define Russia's 'traditional' Islam are best explained through the prism of the economic, political and social turbulence that Russia has been dealing with since the early 1990s.

The case of Russia's Muslims also shows the complexity of interplays between the coloniser and the colonised, the oppressor and the oppressed. A focus on religious persecution risks depicting communities affected by state-sanctioned violence and subjugation as passive victims. Although in many aspects weaker than their Orthodox Christian counterparts, Russia's Muslims nevertheless participated in governing institutions since being incorporated into the Russian empire. Though profoundly discriminated, they contributed to various areas of the imperial project, especially knowledge production, in

the process changing their interlocutors as well as themselves. The Soviet experiment of eradicating religion from public life has made distinguishing victims from perpetrators particularly difficult; both majority and minority religious communities were profoundly affected, while their official religious leadership developed a close relationship with the state.

Experiences of Muslims who have been part of the ‘Russian empire’ for centuries are multisided and involute. However, the complexity of governance practices and Muslims’ agency in them does not discharge us from the obligation to study these experiences critically. As Russia currently faces yet another acute political crisis, it is still to be seen what opportunities will arise in the aftermath to enable such critical engagements.