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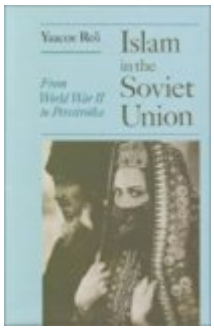

Yaacov Ro'i. *Islam in the Soviet Union: From the Second World War to Gorbachev.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. xxvii + 764 pp. $60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-11954-2.

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Managing Islam--Soviet-Style

This past year, an unusual lamb was born in a small village in the Fergana Valley of Uzbekistan. Bearing markings which resembled the Arabic words for Allah and Muhammad, the animal quickly became the object of popular veneration, with pilgrims coming from all over Central Asia and, reportedly, from as far away as China and Saudi Arabia to seek the spiritual blessings of the miraculous sheep. While the response of the faithful in Central Asia is in keeping with past traditions, what is even more significant for our purposes here is that the Uzbek government has reacted in much the same fashion as their Soviet predecessors, aggressively utilizing the state-controlled media and official Islamic authorities to pronounce on the impermissibility of venerating the sheep. In effect, the current rulers of independent Uzbekistan over the past twelve years have adopted much of the strategy and structure of the former USSR for dealing with Islam. It is, in part, this continuity between the approaches of the Soviet Union and the newly independent states that makes this new book by Yaacov Ro'i so timely and useful.

As the subtitle indicates, Ro'i focuses on the period between World War II and Gorbachev's reforms, correctly pointing out that Islam in the Soviet Union during this era has received very little scholarly attention. His stated goal is to understand how Islam survived under an authoritarian, hostile regime. The result is this massive book of over seven hundred pages, divided into five parts with twelve chapters, plus an opening chapter on methodology and a concluding afterword, supported by close to three thousand footnotes.

The book opens with a short but important chapter on methodology in which Ro'i describes his source material, mainly the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC) and the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA) archives, plus reports from these organizations found in Moscow party archives and Uzbekistan state archives. Faced with a mountain of data, Ro'i chose to concentrate selectively on four regions as exemplary: Osh (in the Kyrgyz portion of the Fergana Valley), Tajikistan, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR, and the Kabardino-

Balkar ASSR. In gaining access to the archives, the author was able to go beyond the work of an earlier generation, characterized by Alexandre Bennigsen and his school, which relied on published propaganda literature. However, Ro'i's archival sources are those of the same "agitprop" groups that produced the published propaganda. Thus, while one step back, the perspective is still that of officialdom and, significantly, reflects the subjects the authorities were interested in at any given moment rather than those of the contemporary Muslim population or current scholars [1]

In part 1, Ro'i presents the "setting" for Islam in the USSR. The first chapter covers Soviet religious policy in general and how policy toward Islam fit into this system. Here the author lays out a helpful method of periodization that is followed throughout the book. He divides the era into five periods, beginning with the years from 1943 to 1947, years characterized by a "legitimization of religion" due to World War II. Alarmed at the revival of religion, the authorities responded with a clampdown which spanned Ro'i's second period, from 1947 to 1954. This is followed by a brief period from 1955 to 1958, the era of de-Stalinization, which Ro'i describes as the best years for Islam between World War II and Perestroika. The fourth period, Khrushchev's antireligious campaign of 1958-64, saw the pendulum swing back yet again. And finally, the long period of "normalization" from 1965 to 1985, when the authorities tolerated religion as a necessary evil. In this chapter Ro'i also introduces Ivan Polianksii, the prominent head of the CARC from its founding in 1944 until his death in 1956, and the single most important individual in shaping postwar Soviet policy toward Islam.

In chapter 2 Ro'i attempts to provide some measure of the scope of Islamic activity in the Soviet Union using statistics which can be deduced from government sources, an admittedly difficult task due to the propensity of officialdom to lie in order to protect their own interests. While the number of registered mosques is obviously fairly easy to determine (reaching a high--at least until 1989--of 416 in 1949, a number which Ro'i points out is proportionally low when compared to the Russian Orthodox Church, and even fewer in number than the churches of the Roman Catholics, Baptists, Lutherans, and Old Believers), the actual attendance is much more difficult to assess, let alone the level of commitment of even those who did attend. Add to this Ro'i's affirmation of the common belief that unregistered prayer-houses and clergy were far more numerous than registered ones, and we have a hazy picture at best. Despite the difficulties, the available statistics do confirm Polianski's assessment in 1947 (cited by Ro'i, p. 99) that Islam was the "most significant of all faiths in the Soviet Union after the Russian Orthodox Church from the point of view of the number of its adherents."

In part 2 Ro'i turns to the substantive portion of his study by first analyzing the role of "establishment Islam" in the postwar period. This includes the four geographically defined "Spiritual Directorates" (chapter 3), and the registered clergy and mosques under them (chapter 4). In assessing the role of the Spiritual Directorates, Ro'i notes their ambiguous position within the Soviet system. On the one hand, the authorities wanted the directorates to be strong enough to exert control over Islam, but not so strong as to encourage religious practice. In the end, both the state and the believing populace viewed the directorates with suspicion, as the latter tried to maintain a balancing act between their two constituencies in order to enhance their own positions. Ultimately, in Ro'i's assessment, the Spiritual Directorates played a key role in maintaining Islam in the Soviet era, though as hostility toward Moscow grew among Muslims the directorates found themselves hopelessly compromised.

In chapter 4 Ro'i discusses the role of registered mosques and their clergy. The policy of registration in the post-World War II era was in con-

stant flux. At times the authorities appeared to support registering mosques and clergy as a means to better control them (a kind of Soviet version of the debate over legalized drugs as a means for control and taxation); at other times this policy would be reversed and Moscow would order massive closings of mosques. Those Muslims working within the system thus found themselves in a very vulnerable position. Nonetheless, as Ro'i points out, these official clergy went to great lengths to accommodate Islam to the Soviet reality in order to maintain the basics of the faith. However, in the process, they often came to be viewed as mere lackeys of the Soviet state, and thus discredited in the eyes of their own communities. Still, to quote Ro'i, "there seems to be little doubt that they played a significant role in safeguarding the status of Islam throughout the period under discussion, their rather undignified conduct and sycophancy notwithstanding" (p. 286).

In part 3, Ro'i turns to the alternatives to establishment Islam, the so-called "unofficial" or "parallel" Islam. As the author points out, it is generally agreed that since the registered mosques and clergy were too few and far between to meet the needs of the Muslim population, it was impossible, even for a totalitarian state, to prevent the activity of unregistered groups. At the same time, Ro'i offers an important caveat to this portion of his study, namely that all statistics for unregistered groups and individuals are highly questionable and must be used with great caution.

Two significant features of Islam tended to support the activity of unregistered groups: the fact that believers could worship, and in particular pray, anywhere; and secondly that Islam lacks a system of credentialing clergy. Still, as Ro'i points out, most unregistered groups were not clandestine per se; they simply wanted to be left alone and thus chose to ignore legal particulars in order to keep a low profile. While Soviet officials tried to exploit the alleged incompetence of the unregistered clergy who served these congregations, the latter maintained their status due to perceived moral and ethical integrity (as compared to official, compromised, clerics). One significant claim that Ro'i makes in this section is that in the Ferghana Valley and Tajikistan (two current centers of Islamist activity), unregistered mullas were brazenly anti-establishment Islam and even antistate, a feature not generally found in other regions.

In chapter 6 Ro'i turns his attention to the Sufi orders. This is perhaps the least satisfying section of this book, since the author here relies very heavily on the earlier work of Bennigsen and his colleagues, with little critique. The chapter discusses only Central Asia and the Caucasus region, completely passing over Sufism within the RSFSR, which, however, has a rich tradition as well.[2] The emphasis here is on individual "ishans" in Central Asia, and on the Sufi orders, or tariqas, among Chechens and other north Caucasus groups. Ro'i argues that among the Chechens, Sufi orders were especially important from the time of their exile in World War II on, remaining influential even after their return to their homeland. He also repeats here the debatable but frequent claim that Sufis are somehow more likely to be anti-Soviet than other Muslims, an assertion for which there is little real evidence.

In part 4, "The Social Aspect: The Practice of Islam," the author deals with the "sociology" of Islam. After an opening chapter acknowledging the great difficulty in measuring the intensity of belief, Ro'i offers two additional chapters on the rites and rituals of Soviet Muslims. Throughout he notes the key role for elders in the family in maintaining Muslim traditions, especially in Central Asia, due in large part to the living patterns of extended families.

These chapters deal with communal rites and rituals as practiced annually, including descriptions of the fast of Ramadan, plus various other festivals. Ro'i argues that these carry an important social aspect that is not necessarily tied to re-

ligious belief. He then turns to the rites and rituals performed on an individual basis within the family, including marriage, circumcision, and funerals. According to Ro'i, these customs are all but universal due to the great social pressure of the community. However, as the author points out, these practices also frequently show the continuing role of the young, not just the elderly, in maintaining religious traditions.

The final major section of this book deals with "Islam and the Regime." In chapter 10, the author claims that official policy did not distinguish Islam from other religions until the Iranian Revolution (1979) and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Only then was Islam seen as requiring a distinct policy. Ro'i describes the constant debate within officialdom over the effectiveness of, or even need for, suppression of Muslim activity. He concludes that both the government and the Muslim community saw the current arrangement as a temporary compromise, which they both hoped to erode in their own favor.

When he turns to the local organs of government, Ro'i points out that the CARC sources tend to blame these institutions for most shortcomings in policy, a view which Ro'i appears to accept. While local elites could sometimes be overly harsh in an effort to impress the national or republican centers, more often they acted to protect their own people (and their religious practices) against outsiders. Ro'i concludes that local governments in fact helped Islam to survive in the USSR.

In the final substantive chapter, Ro'i briefly explores the relationship of Islam and nationalism without, however, providing much that is new. He details the basic view of the Soviets that nations are defined most strongly by language. Ro'i doubts the suggestion of some that identification with the umma remained stronger than with the Soviet-created nationalities, while affirming the common use of "Muslim" in a cultural sense rather than belief (thus, for example, all Kyrgyz are Muslims by definition--an approach similar to Orthodox perceptions).

The afterword touches on the fact that the post-Soviet independent states all use a system very similar to the old Soviet one. While there are some differences--for example Uzbekistan president Islam Karimov's support of the Naqshbandi Sufi order as a counterbalance to perceived "Wahabi" threats--generally the bureaucratic structures are very similar to those of the USSR.

In conclusion, Ro'i offers the student of Muslim communities in the USSR a tremendous amount of information from his mining of the Soviet archives. In addition, this book would be profitable reading for those interested in other religions in the USSR, as it provides many lines of comparative study of Soviet policy toward religion in general. However, due to the selection method that Ro'i must employ to deal with the mountain of material available to him, the reader is left wondering just how anecdotal this book ultimately is, despite the wave of references the author provides. While serving as a helpful guide to the Soviet-era archives, the book is also frustrating due to the author's frequent repetition, as borne out by the numerous footnotes referring not to archival sources but to other pages in the book. Thus, Ro'i's work is not the last word on the subject, despite its size, but will serve as a basic, perhaps even necessary, starting point for future research.

Notes

[1]. For a lengthy and insightful critique of Bennigsen's (and Ro'i's) approach (which appeared while this review was in preparation), see Devin DeWeese, "Islam and the Legacy of Sovietology: A Review Essay on Yaacov Ro'i's *Islam in the Soviet Union*," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 13:3 (2002), pp. 298-330.

[2]. For earlier periods, see Michael Kemper, *Sufis und Gelehrte in Tatarien und Baschkirien, 1789-1889* (Berlin, 1998). The reader wishes that Ro'i could have elucidated the state of this Sufi

tradition in the Soviet period from the archives he utilized.