



## Stalin in Mecca

*Robert D. Crews analyzes Homo tsariticus islamicus. And a story about Soviet Muslims as consensual imperial subjects*

Although the Russian and Islamic empires were heirs to a common Byzantine heritage, they experienced about a half-millennium of bellicose relations while the Russians expanded steadily into Central Asian lands.

Splendidly, “this book shows how Russia became a Muslim power and how the government made Islam a pillar of imperial society, transforming Muslims into active participants in the daily operation of the autocracy and the local construction and maintenance of the empire.”

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Istanbul's German Embassy guided the concerted German-Ottoman  jihad effort from 1914 to 1918: the Soviets followed suit and proclaimed their red jihad for "oppressed people against all colonialists"

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Thereafter, Bolsheviks cast an atheistical shadow over all that mattered to the Muslim faithful. Those infidels managed even to create an Eurasian brand of Islam and a *Homo sovieticus islamicus*.

Bolsheviks aspired to world revolution and called Muslims to jihad against the rulers of rival empires, but Hitler turned Muslim prisoners of war around to jihad against their Soviet masters. After the Germans' defeat, some of those anti-Soviet Muslims from Central Asia settled down in Munich.

With the Cold War in full swing, Western clandestine services recruited among them. Some were dispatched undercover as pilgrims to Mecca after Stalin's death, so that they could discuss Khrushchev and de-Stalinization with pilgrims from Soviet Central Asia—Tatars, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Turkmenians, Tadjiks, Uzbeks—, and citizens of some other "-stan" lands.

The aim of Western intelligence was to explore Islamic potential for opposition to the Soviet colonization of their lands. But the leader of Soviet pilgrims, imam Mirza G. Salikhov, readily found passages in the Qur'an that could be interpreted in the Kremlin's favor. The imam drew his salary from Moscow, though in the past he had spent two years in the GULag. He knew of Khrushchev's reforms, but not of his secret anti-Stalin speech.

Imam: "There is one school for all the Moslems of the USSR in Bukhara. We are now negotiating for the opening of another school in Ufa."

3. "You departed for Mecca on July 10, and on July 9, articles against the Islamic religion appeared in the Soviet newspapers. Have you your own press organ at the Clerical Administration in which you may defend our religion against all kinds of slander from the communists?"

Imam: "We have no press organ, but we are also negotiating on this subject. One cannot act against science and all the things written in our Soviet newspapers are based on science, my son." Here he, himself, smiled ironically.

4. "If there exists any religious freedom, why then is religion not taught at Soviet schools?"

Imam: "In our country the church is separated from the state. Schools belong to the state."

5. "Why don't you open your own schools where the children could have lessons of religion several times a week?"

Imam: "The laws of the state object to this. These laws were accepted by organs of the people's power. You are a lawyer yourself, you ought to know about that." Here I stressed that the Criminal Code prohibits the teaching of religion, and that this law was not passed by the people, but by an atheistic party. The Imam did not say anything more, he only smiled.

6. "May you print the Koran according to your own wish?"

Imam: "Yes, this year 3,500 copies of it were printed in Tashkent."

7. "Isn't this too little for over 30,000,000 Moslems?"

Imam: "Whoever is interested in this can find it. In my Moscow mosque all the shelves are packed with Koran copies."

At this I remarked: "Well, then probably all the 3,500 Koran books published in Tashkent, must be in your mosque." The Imam smiled again.

8. "In what language is the Koran published?"

Imam: "In Arabian."

9. "What <sup>alphabet</sup> languages are the children taught in school?"

Imam: "Russian."

10. "Then the new generation is unable to read the prayers printed in Arabian type?"

Imam: "Many children learn the prayers in their family, at home."

11. "But parents who belong to the young generation do not know the Arabian alphabet!"

Imam: "Persons who are about 36 or 38 and above generally know the Arabian alphabet. Besides, who believes in God will find a way...."

Spying on Islam: 1956 talk with Imam Salikhov of Soviet pilgrims in Mecca as reported by former Soviet Muslims who were sent from Munich to Mecca. The German Islam policy used spys as pilgrims in Mecca too, and pan-Islamic slogans during World War I. In 1920 the Soviets picked this line up to incite a world revolution and instigate their red jihad against all the foreign overlords. On 13 August 1956 Radio Taschkent broadcasted in Usbekian that the Soviet pilgrims do the *Hajj* in Mecca. The group, led by Imam Mirza Gumaretdin Salikhov, spent also some days in Cairo to visit the al-Azhar University and sights.

Nevertheless, according to Western intelligence, Salikhov smoothly combined Islamic and communist ways of life; and most of the Muslims in his group (who rejected proffered gifts) also spoke favorably of their life in the U.S.S.R. Only one among them disclosed that, in order to encourage his prompt return, the Soviets had compelled him to leave his family at home.

In Mecca, these Soviet Muslims acted as consensual imperial subjects even when, in Moscow, the anti-Stalin disclosures were being made. The Soviet Muslims in Mecca spoke of "our government" and rejected "counterrevolutionary lies."

As we know, there are now Muslims in the Russian Federation who would like to return to those "sunny Soviet days" before the onset of "today's chaos."

A question worth asking is why the Soviets were so much more skillful in their dealings with Muslims than either their postcommunist successors or their Western rivals have been.

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**Robert D. Crews:** *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2006), 463 pp.