

Conclusion: Damaged but Not Destroyed

Was the Soviet anti-Islamic campaign a success or a failure? Such an either-or question is too simple, of course. Obviously, the Soviets inflicted tremendous damage on Islam as the primary public (state) means of ordering society. As a matter of personal belief, morals, and a powerful private (nongovernmental) influence on society, however, Islam survived Communism. The interesting questions, then, have less to do with putative “success” or “failure” than with why the campaign took the course that it did and how the great conflict of rival belief systems affected the antagonists.

The campaign against Islam was both carefully planned and utterly chaotic. Lenin’s government didn’t gain even nominal control over Turkestan until 1919 and then had to spend several years trying to repair the ravages of the civil war. The most significant damage was not physical (although the 1.6 million people dead of starvation should not be forgotten) but lay in the intense hostility and mistrust between Turkestanis and Europeans. Until 1922 the Bolshevik government in Tashkent (the Turkburo) concentrated on returning property to Islamic institutions and reopening Islamic courts and schools. It openly cooperated with Muslim clergy, establishing state-sponsored “spiritual administrations.” The administrations were not a wholly new creation; they had roots in both the Muslim Spiritual Assembly, which Catherine II had founded in 1788, and the Muslim tradition of judicial councils called *mahkama-i Sharia*. Ultimately, however, they were not a sign of Bolshevik friendship toward Islam, as most clergy were well aware. Like their Imperial predecessors, the administrations were designed to give the state control over the clergy; only those approved by the state could be members. The Bolshevik administrations went even further, being deliberately intended to split the clergy by giving reform-minded or pro-Soviet clergy a power base over and against traditionalists. This was the first step in the anti-Islamic campaign.

The establishment of the Central Asian Bureau in 1922 can be used to mark the real founding of Soviet Central Asia. Sredazburo focused its energies on building the Central Asian republics and native party cadres. In 1923 it began the slow, but systematic, confiscation of waqf lands and properties, restriction and destruction of the courts, and restriction of the Muslim school system. By 1927 the party, now dominated by Stalin and his many supporters, was in a strong enough position to

launch a frontal assault to close the mosques, eliminate the clergy, and initiate sweeping changes in the traditional family structure and status of women. Once these goals had been substantially accomplished, the 1930s could be devoted to reorganizing the bureaucracy and cleaning up "survivals" (*perezhitki*) of feudalism. At every turn, however, party and state officials found that their expectations had come undone and that Islam was everywhere, only barely out of sight.

Several factors contributed to the chaotic nature of the campaign. An important one during the 1920s was the sheer physical difficulty of trying to build and run a modern government in harsh terrain thousands of miles from Moscow. Roads and telephone lines had to be built, paper was in desperately short supply, public sanitation and health systems were primitive, mechanized transportation was rare, and even the police had trouble obtaining horses. The lack of paper and telephone lines made it extremely difficult for the Uzbek Communist Party to supervise local cell activities and almost impossible for Sredazburo or the Orgburo in Moscow to obtain accurate information about conditions on the ground.

The government had not anticipated the consequences of rivalries between agencies over scarce resources. When local municipal service agencies began to seize waqf assets from Narkompros, the state was almost powerless to stop them. As a result of the seizures, state plans to use waqf income to build a secular school system were largely sabotaged. Scarcity of building materials forced the state to put secular court chambers in mosques, because it was unable to construct new buildings. Not only was the partial takeover of mosques for secular purposes offensive to Muslims, but the mosques were not very well suited for use as courts. An even worse alternative was the tearing down of existing buildings to use their materials to build new ones. The Andijan incident of 1927 amounted to the destruction of a school in order to build a school, with results that common sense should have easily predicted.

The Soviet system disdained common sense, however, which ultimately was one of the major causes of its downfall. The pattern of command seen here time and again was that the Orgburo and Politburo issued decrees that were very often vague and contradictory to one another. Regarding the attacks on Muslim clergy and mosques, it appears that the party launched action months, if not years, before formulating specific instructions for cadre behavior. Faced with impossible expectations and vague instructions (at best), it is not surprising that local officials stumbled around, here ignoring orders that they simply could not fulfill (the 1931 decree on universal compulsory education), there fulfilling them with far too much zeal (closing mosques in Bukhara Okrug).

In addition to these formidable problems, party personnel were in a constant state of flux, due to alternating purges and korenizatsiia-related promotions. Even if an official was actually qualified for his or her job, was not an alcoholic or an opium addict, and had a reasonable command of Russian and the local language (an exceedingly rare combination), she or he was very likely to be purged at some point. In some respects it is a wonder that the Communists accomplished as much as they did.

The Soviet government attacked religion because its Marxist-Leninist ideology

dictated an atheist society. It also attacked because it could not tolerate any rival for power. While there was a period when historians tended to minimize the role of ideology in the USSR, it has regained prominence in recent debates, partly because blind adherence to ideology goes a long way toward explaining the incredible inefficiency and self-destructiveness of the system.

The Politburo issued instructions based on how it thought that things should be, not on how they actually were. Sometimes this happened because ideological romance overrode the best advice of party members. Mirsaid Sultan Galiev and others repeatedly warned the party that only a cautious, educational approach would win Muslims over to atheism, that Russians preaching scientific materialism would only remind Muslims of Russians preaching Orthodoxy, and that the particulars of local cultures always had to be taken into account. In spite of agreeing with this advice in principle, in reality party officials had no patience with the process of winning people by conviction. It was slow, fraught with the danger that ideological compromise might creep in somewhere, and was far too unheroic for a group of people saturated with romantic fantasies of fighting on the barricades of the cotton front, the grain requisition front, the illiteracy front, and so on. Communist heroism demanded action and sacrifice, which is why Hamza's fatally foolish attack on a holy site was held up as a great example of martyrdom for the true faith, even when, in fact, he damaged the godless movement. Similarly, the party could not wait for Muslims to decide on their own to close mosques and turn away from clergy or for economic modernization to improve women's lives gradually. The entire First Five-Year Plan was predicated on unprecedented human effort yielding unprecedented results; exhortations to avoid hurting the feelings of believers simply could not match that level of drama.

To my mind this preference for heroic drama over actual results raises the question of whether we are dealing with ideological or anti-ideological obsessions. Being driven by a theory without regard to the reality that theory supposedly describes would logically result in the rote application of that theory over and over again: Marx and Lenin promised that someday reality would comply. In some cases the Soviets did precisely that, notably in insisting on applying class differentiations everywhere—even small Arctic tribes like the Chukchi had to have "kulaks" and "poor peasants." We have seen how party propagandists divided the Muslim clergy into "bourgeois," "reactionary" and "feudal" elements, regardless of the vast differences between Turkestani and European historical development.

For the most part, however, the anti-Islamic campaign was not an exercise in the blind application of ideology. The party repeatedly changed its ideology to fit immediate needs, especially in the crisis periods of the civil war and the Great Break. Lenin was probably being purely pragmatic (and cynical) when he promised Muslims their full cultural rights in November 1917 in order to reach the opposing goal of a homogenized international proletarian society. He believed that his ends justified any means, especially when the survival of Communism was at stake, but he believed in his Marxist vision with the fervor of a saint. Twelve years later, when the party line shifted from proclaiming that the paranji was evil because it dehumanized women and injured their health, to proclaiming that the paranji was

evil because it interfered with women's labor in factory and field, it signaled a change in ends as well as means. Ideology did not appear to have a fixed role for Stalin; it was a firm guide in some cases and a tool to be changed as needed in others.

What is most difficult to understand are the many instances under Stalin when the party proclaimed an ideological line but behaved differently in reality. The quiet abandonment of *korenizatsiia*, while insisting that the policy had worked well and was still in force, is a comprehensible case of trying to save face while correcting a mistake—Western governments have used this tactic for centuries. In contrast, the attacks on mosques and clergy are an example of direct denial, where in principle the people were turning away from mosques voluntarily, or the state bureaucracy was carefully overseeing the closure of mosques, but in reality the processes were being run by the secret police and/or were in a state of total chaos. One can argue, and some historians do, that this simply proves the brutal, filthy, lying nature of Stalin's regime, which rested on cynicism and naked violence. This is certainly an appealing interpretation with much evidence to support it, not least the extensive memoir and *samizdat* literature that was published in the postwar period.

But there is also plenty of evidence that, however much assault tactics may have accomplished the ultimate goal (a question in itself), party officials in Moscow and Central Asia fought against them. The most common reason was that perpetrators of "excesses" were violating party orders. However belated and/or inadequate, Moscow had issued instructions for how to close mosques, take over waqfs, and so on. The ethic of "iron party discipline" was strongly ingrained in senior officials, who were genuinely outraged when their orders were disobeyed. Moreover, if the party could not even control its own cadres, how could it claim to control the vastness of the Soviet empire? Repeated violations of party instructions and frustration of party efforts to stop these violations simply reminded Zelenskii, Ikramov, and others of how tenuous their hold on Central Asia was.

Second, from the local view it became plain that, for the most part, these assault tactics did not accomplish anything positive for the Soviet regime. As Ikramov himself said regarding the violation of the Khudoyar-Otolik mosque, "If someone wants an uprising in Uzbekistan, all that is needed is several of these ugly incidents." Forced mosque closings created outrage, the unveiling campaign injured or killed more women than it helped, and sending Godless activists to mosques on Muslim holidays occasionally resulted in murder, followed by state reprisals. The use of naked force undermined what little faith people had in the government, as when villagers in Khojent Okrug openly acknowledged that their opinions didn't matter; the state would do what it wanted regardless.

Brute tactics also turned out not to work in the plain sense, either. Mosques that were technically closed actually functioned, women who unveiled at party meetings revealed to walk back home, clergy evaded taxes, and religious tenets continued to be taught after Muslim schools were closed, sometimes by teachers in Soviet schools. Thousands of clergy were eliminated, the Arabic script banned, and mosques physically destroyed, yet by the middle of World War II the regime gave up trying to destroy Islam and settled for a renewal of state-controlled spiritual

administrations run by thoroughly cowed clergy.

So we have the spectacle of a regime that embarked on a course of action for ideological reasons, blatantly ignored the stated principles and strategies of that ideology, and pursued tactics that alienated the population and didn't work very well anyway. The regime also studiously ignored the abundant evidence that its actions were undermining its own stated goals, to the point where it shot party members who called attention to this problem. By the time the 1936 Constitution was promulgated, the militant atheist clauses of Marxist-Leninist doctrine came to be honored mostly in the breach; religion would be controlled and occasionally persecuted but not destroyed by the inexorable forces of scientific materialism. The only religions that the party continued to make serious efforts to stamp out were Judaism, the Ukrainian Uniate Church, and the smaller Protestant sects that resisted state control, such as the evangelicals and Jehovah's Witnesses. Given that these religions are still enduring hostility in the post-Soviet period, one can hardly attribute their problems to Communist ideology.

If we consider for a moment the role of Marxism-Leninism as a quasi-religion, Stalin and his supporters, in fact, exhibited very little faith in their doctrine. They had inherited Trotsky's and Lenin's deep impatience with the slowness of historical processes, but the behavior of Stalin's regime suggests that the only "ideology" in which it truly had faith was force and unquestioning obedience. The sub-text of Stalin's militant atheism seemed to be "Yes, Marx and Lenin taught that religion would die under the withering gaze of science and socialist economic conditions (although Lenin was perfectly happy to shoot and jail clergy to hurry the process along). But the only thing that will really work is a full-bore attack." It was that ideology—only absolute immediate obedience, obtained by any means, will attain the goals of the regime—that Stalin pursued blindly in the face of all evidence that he was destroying the very things for which he stood.

It was an anti-ideology in the sense that it required no system of political thought to explicate it, so that the goals of the regime and the reasons for those goals could change fairly freely, and the gap between stated goals and reality could be brushed over with few qualms. In this nonsystem, bringing Islam back under the wing of state support in 1943 was acceptable because the regime perceived it as a defeated and controllable enemy. Obedience was the important thing; Marx's ideal of an atheist proletariat could be left behind. One cannot label this anti-ideology simple amoral pragmatism, either, because forced obedience was pursued when it should have been obvious that it was not achieving the goal or was hurting the regime in other ways—only catastrophes on the scale of collectivization or imminent Nazi victory in 1941 forced Stalin to change course. A truly pragmatic leader would have dropped the failed strategy for something more successful before reaching the edge of the chasm.

I don't want to argue that Stalin *consciously* covered his faith in forced obedience with a Marxist-Leninist veneer, that he was consciously hypocritical. Despite valiant efforts by Richard Tucker and others, even once Stalin's personal files are fully accessible, we will probably never really understand how his mind worked. I agree with Tucker, though, that Stalin desperately needed to believe some

things (that the purge victims were, in fact, guilty as charged, so they had to be tortured into signing confessions rather than simply shot), and that the correctness of his approach to religion was probably one of the things of which he succeeded in convincing himself. This view is partially supported by the published memoirs of his loyal servants Viacheslav Molotov and Lazar Kaganovich, which show no evidence that their authors felt they had ever done anything wrong.¹ Stalin's psychology was complex and slippery; he was certainly aware of what he was doing but managed to avoid seeing the damage that his approach caused.

One aspect of Stalin's anti-Islamic campaign had deeper roots in Imperial Russia than in Marxism-Leninism: trying to ban circumcision, the paranji, and so on was trying to ban what made Muslims the Other to Russians. The tsars over a much longer period of time had pursued an inconsistent policy, treating some Muslims differently than others, launching and then dropping Russification campaigns, and after the eighteenth century generally seeming content to keep Muslims at a distance rather than trying to force them to become True Russians. Nonetheless, influential Russian thinkers such as Pestel and Ilminskii continued to believe that full Russification was the best way to guarantee the empire. What developed in the USSR by the mid-1930s was a much more concerted effort to homogenize the various peoples and push them all as much as possible into the same mold. One might even call this phenomenon Stalin's version of "Russia one and indivisible," the old Russian tendency to xenophobia and intolerance of difference that Lenin genuinely tried to eradicate. Even where national differences were celebrated (in the folk dance troupes, national poets, theaters, operas, etc.), these expressions of "national culture" still had to take a Russian/European form. This effort, too, was far from entirely successful, but it sank in enough that post-Soviet Uzbek *spektakly* celebrating independence look and feel very familiar to anyone who has seen similar Russian shows during the Soviet period.²

One final factor, prosaic but quite important, in the anti-Islamic campaign must be considered: the role of simple ignorance, stupidity, and lack of forethought. Moscow repeatedly issued orders that were either uselessly vague or that Central Asian officials found impossible to fulfill because of physical conditions or social conditions (especially in the case of the women's campaign) or because one set of orders contradicted another. One explanation for this is that the state was blinded by ideology, and in some cases it was. Another is Machiavellian cunning—that Stalin deliberately created loopholes that allowed him to evade responsibility for the disastrous consequences of his policies. This makes a certain amount of sense until one sees the frantic efforts to backpedal before the damage grew too large or considers the massive disorganization that plagued the Soviet government at all levels. In order to function properly, a large-scale conspiracy needs sure

communication, guaranteed access to resources, and obedient members. The Communist Party claimed that it possessed all that, and many of its enemies believed the claim, but, as we have seen, the ragged reality was quite different. Even if it had wanted to, the Orgburo could not have issued practical instructions to Sredazburo because Moscow had very little accurate information about events and conditions in Central Asia. Sredazburo itself often had very little idea of what was going on in its fiefdom. Then there's the fact that party officials had no idea what they were doing. They couldn't, because no one had ever tried such a massive and deep social engineering project before. Second, the bulk of party activists were people who had been rapidly promoted from the depths, hurriedly trained, if they were lucky, and put to work. Stupid mistakes were the inevitable result, compounded by the never-ending language problems and the likelihood that no sooner had someone gained real expertise than they were purged. The party's emphasis on unquestioning loyalty itself bred stupidity; people with original and effective ideas became rarer and rarer as time went on. Finally, Stalin's striving for instant results and the underlying romantic fantasies of the Great Break made careful thinking through of actions and their potential consequences impossible. Zhenotdel leaders never stopped to consider what might happen if thousands of Muslim women suddenly unveiled; it would have ruined their grand vision of Communist (Russian) heroes liberating their backward Oriental sisters. This is a point where ideology returns to haunt us, with great abstract ideas blinding their executors to mundane reality.

This book has discussed how the atheist campaign was also significantly hampered by malingering and disobedience on the part of native party members and state employees at all but the highest levels, even though Ikramov, Hamza, and a few others worked very hard to destroy Islam. The failure of bloody terror to eradicate this kind of behavior must have completely confounded higher party officials. The Central Asian party members who did work against Islamic institutions, whether affiliated with the Union of Militant Godless or not, were probably motivated more by power politics than Communist ideology. Those who became high government officials in the 1920s remembered the ulama and other clergy as supporters of regimes that they had despised and fought against before 1917. Even though they still considered themselves Muslim (Akmal Ikramov seems to have been one of the very few exceptions), they were quite willing to destroy the old Islamic establishment as a remnant of a hated system. Younger officials and those who joined the party and government later did not have the same personal associations of the clergy with the emirs and bays, but they had signed on with a government system that tolerated no rivals, and so protecting their own livelihoods and families meant at least a superficial support of the anti-Islamic campaign. This led to the curious phenomenon, noted throughout the Soviet period, of party officials who would close down a mosque one day and hire a mulla to do the funeral of a relative the next. This dualistic attitude on the part of many Central Asian bureaucrats contributed mightily to the confusion of anti-Islamic efforts and the survival of Islam.

The clergy themselves did not behave as Communist theorists had expected

¹Lazar Kaganovich, *Pamiatnye zapiski* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996). Feliks Chuev, *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics* (Chicago: I. R. Dee, 1993).

²Laura Lee Adams, "Celebrating Independence: Arts, Institutions, and Identity in Uzbekistan" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Berkeley, 1999).

they would or as later scholars have portrayed them. They were neither inflexible fanatics who thought only in terms of violent opposition nor entirely hapless victims of Communist brutality. While the state knew how to deal with the clergy who did fall into those categories, it had not anticipated the strength of those who were willing to adapt Islam to coexist with Communism. In 1923 the party sponsored reformist clergy, but by 1927 the party had come to feel very threatened by these same clergy. The various factions of socialists had always reserved their greatest enmity for each other rather than for the capitalists, and likewise the party in Central Asia felt a much more direct threat from a rival that resembled it, even if only superficially, than from more distant opponents.

The campaign to liberate women threw conflicts among the Muslim clergy into high relief. The majority were fiercely opposed to any change in women's status and encouraged or joined in acts of violence against women who unveiled or acted independently of men. This, in turn, allowed the government to hold them up for ridicule as fanatics who wanted to keep women in chains of dark ignorance rather than join the modern world. Other clergy supported unveiling, either out of personal conviction or more political considerations, a feeling that they stood a better chance of retaining power by supporting a movement that they could not stop in any case. The clergy who supported women's liberation, in turn, revealed a split in the government, between those who wanted to use these mullas to further the campaign and those who feared that any collaboration with liberal clergy would taint the atheist credentials of the Communist Party. Ultimately, the anticollaborationist view prevailed, which provided additional motivation to exterminate the liberal clergy. The party's response to the unexpected strength of the reformists was to strike at them with greater vehemence and violence than they used against the most intransigent conservatives. Nonetheless, reformist ideas hung on well into the 1930s.

Focus on the surprising disobedience of Communists and the resiliency of Islam may lead one to forget or downplay the brutality of the campaign. Despite the many obstacles, the unexpected developments, and the problems caused by its own incompetence, the Communist Party did succeed in inflicting a tremendous amount of damage on Central Asian Islam. Over time the traditional legal, financial, and educational structures of Muslim society were destroyed, leaving the Soviet structures unrivaled. While it took much longer to close the mosques than had been planned, many small mosques and all of the great mosques and madrasas ceased to function independently some time after World War II, although during 1961–1963 Khrushchev still closed 3,567 mostly unregistered mosques in Uzbekistan alone.³ The Soviets wiped out the most learned and active clergy and destroyed several generations of teachers, so that succeeding generations had to rely on fragmentary

and fading memories of prayers, texts, and rituals. Not least among the victims were the tens of thousands of women who were beaten, raped, and murdered by Muslim men in response to the efforts of women's would-be liberators.

While militant atheists did not achieve many of their immediate goals in Stalin's time, they contributed to the forces that ultimately did more damage to traditional Central Asian Islam than anything else, namely, modernity. The radical changes wrought by the Soviets in the economic, social, educational, and political structure of Central Asia gave young Uzbeks a host of new opportunities, if they were willing to play by the masters' rules. Those rules included at least a public lip service paid to atheism, success in the educational system (which meant acceptance of the Russophilic, atheist values enforced there), and learning to say what superiors wanted to hear. However, the new Soviet structures and the pupils whom they produced did not begin to exert significant influence in Uzbekistan until the late 1930s (with the generation that took power after the Terror) and did not take deep root until after World War II. At that, the Soviet system made its most profound impact on the small stratum of the Uzbek urban elite; the vast majority of rural Uzbeks were much less affected by the enforcement of Communist values.

It is also important to recognize that Central Asians, while certainly subordinate and often oppressed within the Soviet Union, were not entirely powerless either and found ways to assert their own goals and desires. The Soviet Union was not simply Russia, Ukraine, and a collection of colonial appendages but an empire of many peoples with vastly unequal amounts of power trying to create and preserve their own niches. It is a final irony not only that they succeeded where Stalin failed but that part of why they succeeded was that Stalin did so much to destroy any chance of Communism's functioning well.

³John Anderson, "Islam in the Soviet Archives: A Research Note," *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (1994): p. 384. Recall that the January 1936 survey had listed a grand total of 3,724 mosques "not closed" in Uzbekistan, even though this figure was a significant undercount.